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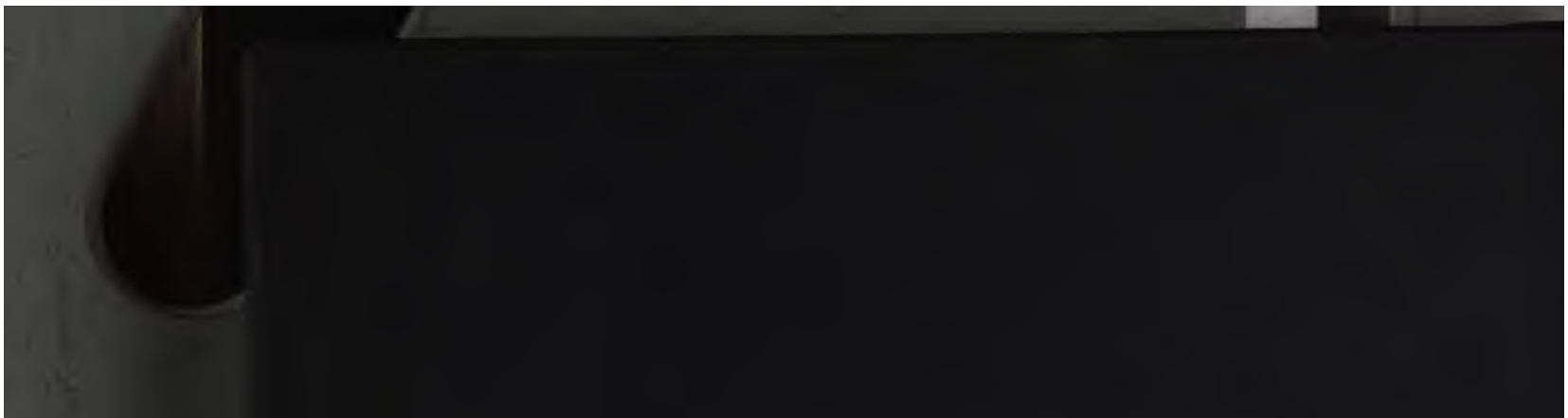

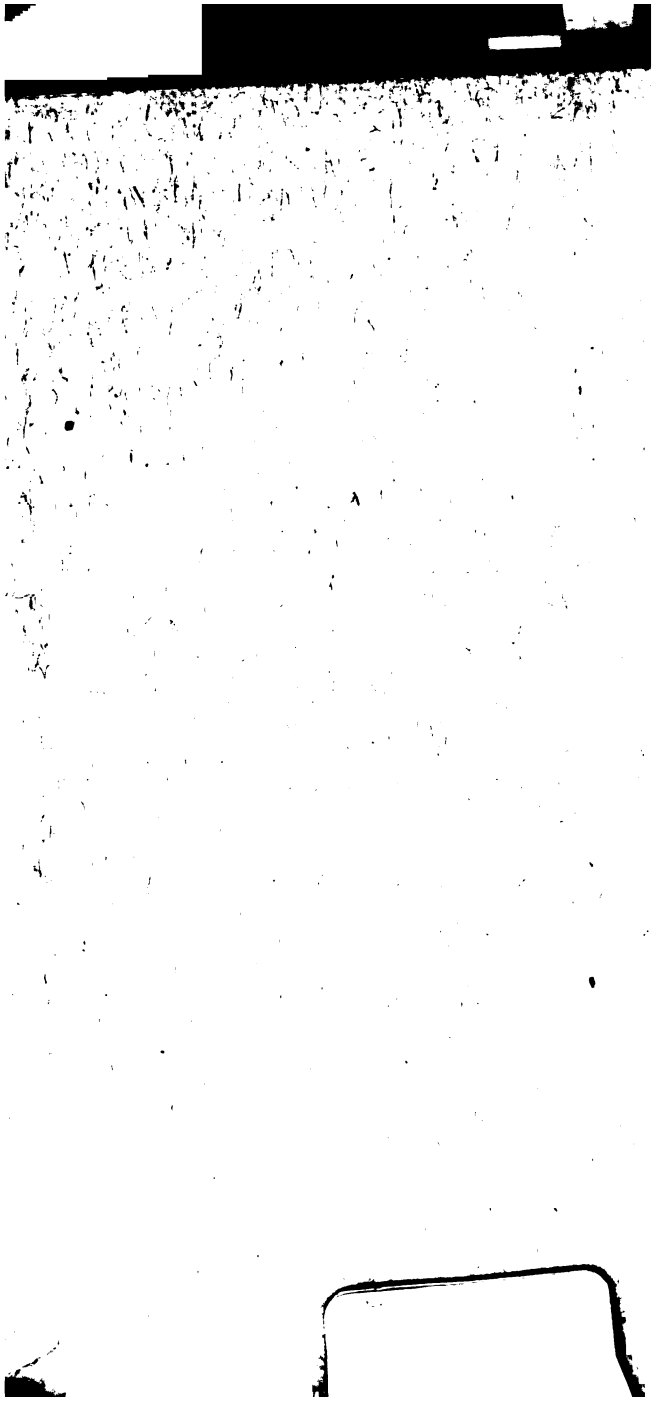

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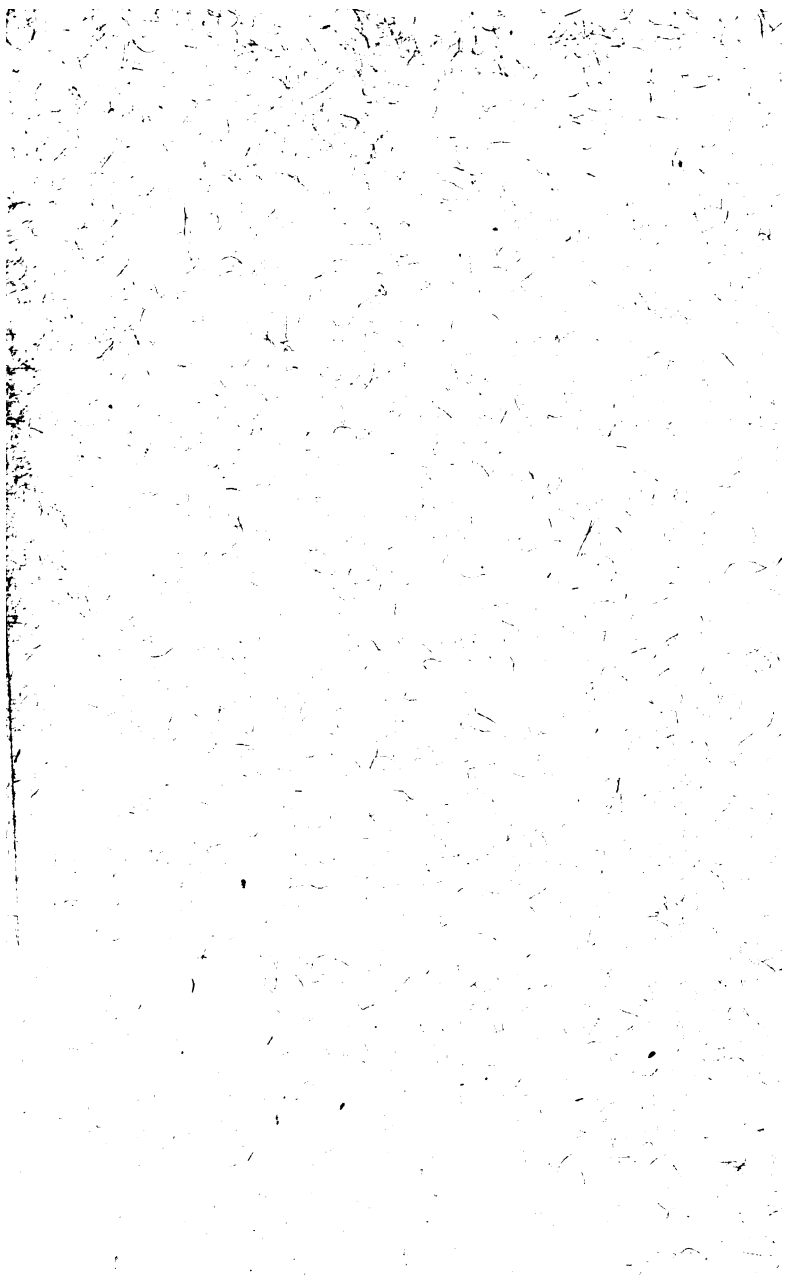

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MY FRIEND JIM.

CHAPTER I.

I REMEMBER it all as clearly as if it had happened yesterday afternoon. It is one of those little scenes which, without being specially significant or suggestive, manage somehow or other to imprint themselves upon the memory, and which remain there while so many hundreds of others fade away and vanish, as the years go on. When I closed my eyes for a moment just now the whole thing came back to me—the dark, musty-smelling study, with one broad sunbeam stretching right across it from the window; Bracknell, Jim, and I standing close together beside the high, empty fire-place; old Lord Staines, looking uncommonly smart and spruce (as he always did in those days), a flower in his buttonhole, and a smile of serene beatitude on his handsome face; and my tutor blinking through his spectacles and

addressing himself, after his customary fashion, to no one in particular.

"I shall be sorry to lose these three fellows," says he. "They aren't bad fellows, you know, taking them all round, and I fancy they will succeed as well in the world as they have succeeded at Eton. Yes, just about as well. Bracknell—well, I don't see what more could have been asked of Bracknell than that he should get into the eleven, and avoid getting into any serious scrapes. He is good-looking, he is good-natured, and from time to time I have even observed gleams of—er—intelligence in him. Bracknell will do; he will adorn his station. Well, then, Maynard. Maynard is clever, if not quite so clever as he thinks himself. I hardly expect him to set the Thames on fire; but I hope his mother will never have reason to be ashamed of him, and I have written to her, telling her that I consider him my show pupil. More than I ought to have said, perhaps, but there's no fear of her disbelieving me. As for Leigh (here my tutor took a few steps forward and patted Jim on the shoulder), what is to be said about you, Leigh? In classics you are but moderate; in mathematics I understand that you are also moderate; you're not in the eleven; you're not in the eight; I doubt very much whether you would be in the boats at all if you hadn't so many friends. In short, Leigh, you are mediocre. But you're the best fellow of the

lot, all the same. And, that being so," added my tutor, looking up with a queer, kindly smile at the young giant who towered nearly a head and shoulders above him, "I should be inclined to prophesy, Leigh, that you will always have plenty of friends, and that you will possibly be—er—more or less imposed upon all your life long."

Lord Staines broke out into laughter at this rather cynical prediction. "We'll look after him," said he; "we'll see that you aren't imposed upon, Leigh."

And I dare say he thought himself quite capable of so doing, although his own career might not have recommended him to an impartial person as being the fittest man in the world to undertake that task. He had always taken a good-humoured and somewhat patronising interest in Jim, whose father and mother were both dead, whose small property adjoined his more extensive one in Berkshire, and who—above all—was his boy's friend. He thought very well of the lad, and indeed was kind enough to say as much there and then. As for Jim's being "the best of the lot," that of course was only a joke. It is not in the least likely that Lord Staines would have been angry with any one who should have seriously declared Jim to be Bracknell's superior. When one is fortunate enough to be the owner of a Derby winner one is not quite so silly as to lose one's temper with a man for proclaiming his own

steady useful roadster to be the more valuable animal of the two.

Poor old Lord Staines was a fond and foolish father, no doubt. I have heard him so described with such wearisome frequency that I should very much like to contradict the statement if I could. That being impossible, I will only venture to assert that there were excuses for him. Everything leads me to believe that if I had a son as handsome, as muscular, as recklessly brave and jolly, and devil-may-care as Bracknell was in those days, I should be proud of him. These attributes may or may not constitute a legitimate cause for parental pride; but I suppose it will hardly be denied that they usually excite it. At the same time, it must be admitted that Lord Staines was a little bit outrageous in his crowing and chuckling, and one can't wonder that some of his friends laughed at him, while others found him rather a bore. Whenever there was a cricket match on he would collect as many cronies as he could induce to accompany him, and would drag them down to Eton to watch his boy bowling and slogging. He himself never wearied of this delightful spectacle, and could not understand that it might eventually pall upon others. He kept Bracknell supplied with plenty of pocket money, laughing good-humouredly at the rapidity with which it was spent. I don't suppose that he even minded much when certain longish bills were sent in to him by

the Windsor and Eton tradesmen, some of whom respectfully intimated that they had not been paid for three years. He, too, had always been open-handed, careless and extravagant; probably he thought it only natural that his son and heir should resemble him, and if by any chance he ever considered the effect of two generations of extravagance upon a not very magnificent rent-roll, he doubtless said to himself that some day Bracknell would marry a woman with money, and that then it would be all right. Such was the course which he had adopted, and it had answered admirably. That is to say that he had not, at the time of which I am speaking, yet reached the last shilling of his late wife's fortune.

He was, at any rate, evidently free from misgivings on that last day of Bracknell's Eton life; for he was literally brimming over with contentment and goodwill. He shook hands with us warmly when the time came for us to wish him good-bye, repeating to us both again and again that although our friend's path in life would no longer be the same as our own (for Bracknell was to join the 4th Life Guards immediately, while Jim and I were to proceed in due course to Oxford), yet we were on no account to imagine that our friendship was at an end.

"We shall all meet at Staines Court before long. Well, perhaps not next autumn, because I shall be in Scotland until rather late in the year;

but some time, you know—some time. And Bracknell will run down to Oxford and look you up. Or why not join us in the north, both of you? Are you fond of stalking? Never tried it? Well, well, everything must have a beginning. Bracknell is as fine a shot for his years as I ever saw. Now, mind, we shall count upon seeing you. Good-bye, my dear fellows, good-bye."

Then he hurried off to Goodwood, taking Bracknell with him, and, I should think, forgot our existence with very great celerity.

I remember that, after we had seen the last of them, Jim said with a sigh, "What a splendid fellow he is!" and was quite angry with me for pretending to think that he alluded to old Staines. I never shared Jim's enthusiastic admiration for Bracknell; but then I am not of an enthusiastic temperament, and have a quick eye (so, at least, I am assured) for any blemishes that may disfigure the characters of my friends. At all events, I thought I had discovered some blemishes in Bracknell's character, and that selfishness was one of them and fickleness another. My impression certainly was that he would trouble himself very little more about us from the moment that circumstances ceased to throw us together; and I have much pleasure in admitting that therein I did him an injustice. We did not, of course, take advantage of that somewhat vague invitation to become Lord Staines's guests in the Highlands;

but a few months later Bracknell redeemed his father's promise that he should look us up at Oxford, and, falling in with many other old Etonians there, had such a gay and uproarious time of it that he was easily persuaded to repeat his visit at an early date. Indeed, during the following two years, he used to make periodical descents upon Christ Church, where a band of choice spirits was ever ready to welcome him, and where his arrival was invariably the signal for a bear-fight upon an unusually extensive scale. On the ensuing day Bracknell would return to London, leaving poor Jim to face the college authorities, who, however, generally let him off easily. I fancy they knew pretty well that he was sure, under all circumstances, to be made the scape-goat; moreover, it really was not in human nature —no, not even in donnish nature—to be hard upon Jim Leigh.

Every now and again Jim would get leave to go up to London for a day, whence he would return a little pale and fagged, but quite delighted with the hospitality of the officers of the 4th Life Guards, whose existence, according to his account, would appear to have been a merry one. I can't speak of it from personal knowledge. Bracknell never asked me to visit him in London; nor did I participate in the bear-fights to which allusion has been made. For one thing, I was a reading man, and for another, I couldn't have ventured to

run the risk of being rusticated and breaking my mother's heart. Jim, as I have mentioned before, was an orphan, and the worst that could have happened to him would have been no such serious matter in his case.

On attaining the age of one-and-twenty he was duly placed in possession of his estate, together with personal property which, I believe, made his income up to something over five thousand a year; so that he was in all senses of the word independent. At his request, however, his uncle and aunt who had resided at Elmhurst throughout his long minority, consented to remain there until he should marry; an event which I had reason to think might not be very remote. But this was a profound secret. Jim had let me into it because from our earliest boyhood he had had no secrets from me; but to not another soul had he spoken of his hopes—least of all to the lady who was the object of them.

I should be very glad to be able to write of Hilda Turner with perfect impartiality; for were that in my power I should probably convey a far better idea of her to the reader, who if he had met her in the flesh would doubtless have been fascinated by her, as most people were, and might even have fallen in love with her, as a great many did. But the simple truth is that I never could endure the girl; and so my evidence must be taken for whatever that of a prejudiced witness may be

worth. I have, at any rate, no hesitation in allowing that she was extremely pretty, although her beauty was not of a regular order, and that her manners were charming, although they did not happen to charm me. She was one of those very fair people whose complexions are of the clearest white, the bloom upon whose cheeks is of the most delicate and exquisite pink, and who seldom become wrinkled before they reach extreme old age. I am told that these enviable peculiarities are due to thickness of the epidermis, and I have sometimes fancied that persons so gifted are apt also to be endued with a certain mental toughness of hide which may perhaps be of some assistance in preserving the smoothness of their brows. But I don't insist upon that point. Hilda had golden hair and blue eyes, and if everybody had teeth like hers the dentists would be driven to find another occupation. To be sure when you began to criticise there were plenty of faults to be found with her face. Her nose, for instance, was too short, her jaw was too square, and her lips were a trifle too thin. I remember once pointing out these defects to my mother, who shook her head, and said that if I expected perfection I should have some difficulty in finding a wife. Certain it is that I am unmarried still (though not, I think, on account of the cause assigned), but I am very sure that my mother would have chosen that I should remain a bachelor to my dying day rather

than that I should fall in love with Hilda Turner.

I suppose that never since the world began did there live quite so poor a judge of character as my dear mother. Partly from having seen very little of the bad side of human nature—for she has been a confirmed invalid, unable to put a foot to the ground, almost from the time of my birth—partly from her unquestioning faith in the wisdom and mercy of an overruling Providence, which causes her to take an optimistic view of everything, her own constant sufferings included; partly, too, from the natural sweetness of her disposition, which renders her, I do believe, incapable of conceiving that any one can be intentionally wicked, she habitually regards others as she wishes them to be, and by no means as they actually are. Yet I recollect that upon one occasion she gave me to understand, with a good deal of circumlocution and hesitation, that she feared Hilda Turner was not an entirely straightforward girl. What her grounds were for formulating this tremendously severe charge I could not induce her to divulge; but I suspect that she had caught the young lady in an unequivocal fib. I could have told her that that was no uncommon occurrence, but I never did tell her such things when I could help it, because the only effect of my doing so was to give her unnecessary pain.

If she had some misgiving about Hilda, she had

none at all about Hilda's father, the rector of the parish, of whom she always spoke as "good Mr. Turner." Good Mr. Turner was—not to mince matters—an ass. There was no harm in him. He pottered about the parish, did a little work, preached us a sermon once a week, which had at least the merit of brevity, and was benevolent in a passive sort of way. Hilda ruled him—I won't say with a rod of iron, for no such formidable weapon could possibly have been required for so gentle a creature; but at any rate she ruled him absolutely.

Our neighbourhood not being a very thickly inhabited one, the few families who lived within a mile or two of each other were naturally intimate. Hilda and Jim and I had grown up from childhood together as companions, and when the Henleys were at Staines Court we also saw a good deal of Bracknell and his sister. However, after Lady Staines's death, the great house was generally empty. Lord Staines was always in London or in Scotland, or at Newmarket, or at some other of the resorts where he spent his money so freely, and it was only at rare intervals that quiet little Lady Mildred would come down for a week or so, attended by her governess and accompanied by one of the aunts who looked after her. She was a demure little mouse of a thing, with bright brown eyes, which saw a good deal more than was commonly supposed, and as kind a heart as ever beat; but as she was rather shy, and had a way

of keeping her opinions to herself, nobody noticed her much. She and Hilda were by way of being friends, although it is scarcely possible that there can have been any real sympathy between them, and when Hilda was in her nineteenth year, Mildred's aunt, Lady Petworth, very good-naturedly invited the rector's daughter to spend a season with her in London, and presented her at Court.

"I rejoice," Mr. Turner used to say, in his placid, deliberate way, "that dear Hilda has kept up her friendship with Lady Mildred. I have encouraged it (I dare say he really thought that his encouragement might be a factor in the question) both because refined companionship cannot but be beneficial to the young, and because I feel that it is desirable that she should see something of—well, of the best society of the day."

Doubtless Hilda also felt the latter result of her intercourse with Lady Mildred to be highly desirable. As for the refined companionship, I dare say she might have made shift to do without that at a pinch.

I can't tell whether it was after Miss Turner's introduction to the "best society of the day" that Jim first discovered how desperately he was in love with her; but it was about that time that—to my sorrow, though not to my surprise—he made me acquainted with the state of his feelings. It was not, however, until more than a year later,

when we had both bidden farewell to Oxford, that matters approached a crisis. Up to then Jim's attentions had been of a most modest and tentative order. He had a poor opinion of his personal charms, and preferred the agony of suspense to the risk of rejection. I am afraid I must plead guilty to having encouraged his diffidence. To confess the truth, I thought it was upon the cards that so captivating a young lady as Miss Turner might chance upon somebody in London whose claims to her regard might be greater than poor Jim's. But such did not prove to be the case. Five thousand a year is not a colossal income, yet, if you will take the trouble to run over the list of your acquaintances, you will find that the bachelors who possess as much are in a small minority; and it seems possible that Hilda may have made that calculation.

And so, one fine hot month of July, when Cranfield Rectory, embosomed among its spreading trees, looked the very spot for the enacting of a pastoral idyll; when the great level lawns at Staines Court were gay with flowers, which there was nobody but the gardeners to admire, and when our own humble domain was, as my mother, who took immense pride in it declared, "quite a show," it came to pass that two young people were constantly to be seen, riding or walking together among the lanes and woods, of whom it might be said that they formed a very handsome couple.

Not that our big-boned, broad-shouldered Jim, with his hook nose, his quiet grey eyes and that large mouth of his, which, upon the smallest provocation, would widen itself into a smile extending from ear to ear, was strictly speaking a handsome man, but perhaps he was near enough being so to justify the above good-natured description, which was uttered by many persons, the Reverend Simeon Turner included. The Reverend Simeon was not ambitious. A son-in-law with five thousand a year, a high moral character, and a malleable disposition was good enough for him.

I was then about to be called to the Bar, and was busy reading law, a study which I thought at the time, and think still, to be among the most repulsive that a moderately intelligent human being can bring his mind to bear upon. One afternoon, while I was sitting with somebody's *Common Law Procedure*, and I forget whose *Precedents of Pleadings* open before me, Jim lounged into my den, and, seating himself sideways upon the table, remarked that he was the happiest fellow in Christendom, or something to that effect.

When you know that your friend is absolutely bent upon making a fool of himself the very stupidest thing in the world is to tell him so. I endeavoured to look delighted, and said, "Has she accepted you, then?"

"Well, no," he answered; "she hasn't exactly

accepted me, for the reason that I haven't asked her; but I think it will be all right. Harry, old chap, I don't know what I have done to deserve such luck!"

Nor did I. I am quite sure that he had never done anything to deserve it; but the thing had come upon him nevertheless; and, after all, one sees many prisoners who hug their chains contentedly. "And why," I inquired, "haven't you proposed to her?"

Jim laughed. "I'm such a duffer!" he replied. "It takes me a long time to get under way, and when I am coming to the point she always manages somehow or other to put me off. Well, it doesn't much matter; there's no hurry, you know."

"None whatever," I agreed, thinking to myself that, so long as the fatal words remained unspoken, there was always just the ghost of a hope left for him.

And then he threw himself into my armchair, lighted a cigar, and began to rhapsodise after a fashion which it would be as tedious to write about as to read.

CHAPTER II.

It was at this somewhat critical juncture that Lord Staines took it into his head to come down to Staines Court, with the avowed intention of remaining there for a considerable time. His arrival, which had been preceded by that of his French cook, his house-steward, his groom of the chambers, and heaven only knows how many other domestic functionaries (for his style of living had always been far in excess of that warranted by his income), caused quite a little stir in the vicinity, and set everybody conjecturing as to its causes. What these were was revealed to us the next morning by Lady Mildred, who lost no time in walking over to see my mother.

"Papa has been very unlucky this year," she said, in her gentle, matter-of-course way. "First of all, his horse lost the Derby by a head, as you know——"

"My dear," interrupted my mother, "I am

afraid I know nothing about the Derby, except that it is a race which takes place every spring."

"No, you wouldn't. But papa knows a great deal about it, and even I know something. Premier must have won if he had not been interfered with. It was nobody's fault, but it was poor papa's misfortune; and since then he has been unlucky at Ascot also. So there is to be no yachting this summer, and we are going to remain here quietly and ask hardly anybody to stay with us."

"It is an ill wind that blows nobody any good," remarked my mother; "it will be a great pleasure to the young people to have you near them. And, perhaps," she added meditatively, "these losses may prove a blessing in disguise to Lord Staines if they induce him to leave off betting on horse-races, which I cannot think right. Because, you see, if one man wins money others must lose it."

Lady Mildred admitted that that was probably the case, but doubted whether the losers were often prevailed upon to give up the game. "As for me," she said, "I would always rather be at Staines Court than anywhere else; and Bracknell is coming down in a few days, so that it will be quite like old times again. But I am afraid he will find it too dull to stay long."

"Oh, but he will have plenty of companions," said my mother, in the innocence of her heart. "There is Harry, you know, and Jim Leigh, and Hilda Turner."

ing glances full into her eyes. The glances failed to arouse any response; she gave him politely but plainly to understand that his interruptions were unwelcome, answered him with a few monosyllables or a faint smile, and immediately turned away to resume her remarks to Lord Staines, who was evidently much tickled by the discomfiture of his heir-apparent.

Jim all this time was very pleasantly engaged in talking over bygone days with Lady Mildred, only every now and again his eyes wandered to Hilda and rested upon her with a ridiculous look of pride and affection. Doubtless he was thinking how good it was of her to take so much trouble to amuse the old gentleman at the head of the table. As for the Reverend Simeon and myself, we ate our dinner, which was an excellent one, and nobody took the smallest notice of us.

Later in the evening, when we assembled in the drawing-room, Lord Staines became grave and silent once more, black Care having, I presume, recalled herself to his memory. Very soon he murmured some excuse and slipped away—perhaps to try and establish a balance between revenue and expenditure in his study. Lady Mildred had some photographs to show to Jim, who may or may not have been as interested in them as he professed to be; Mr. Turner, for lack of a more worthy listener, was fain to favour me with his views upon the subject of secular

education; and while he was expounding these at some length, I saw exactly what I had expected to see. Bracknell seated himself upon a sofa beside Hilda, who put up her fan and received him with a side glance which was half supercilious, half encouraging. He began to address her in a low tone of remonstrance. Presumably he was begging to be informed why she had treated him with such marked coolness, for presently I heard her reply, laughing slightly, "I wouldn't press that point if I were you, Lord Bracknell. If you do, perhaps I may ask for your version of certain stories that I heard about you in London."

"What stories?" he returned eagerly. "Depend upon it, there wasn't a word of truth in them. Surely you don't believe all you are told?" And so forth, and so forth.

The remainder of the colloquy was carried on in such subdued accents that the eloquence of the Reverend Simeon, who was standing very close to me and emphasising his periods by repeated taps upon my shirt-front with his forefinger, drowned it. But, indeed, I was not curious to hear more. How many times, I wonder, has that selfsame dialogue been conducted in identical terms since the world began, and how many times will it be repeated before the human race becomes extinct? Generally, I think, about five to ten minutes elapse before the point is reached when the lady invites unreserved confession as the preliminary to

possible absolution; and then the man tells her—well, I suppose he sometimes tells her the truth, though I should imagine that that is a rare case. What Bracknell said to Hilda, after they had moved away slowly towards the open French window, through which they presently vanished, I have no idea, nor can it be of the smallest consequence. What I do know is that they were absent for the best part of an hour, and that long before the expiration of that time Jim had grown fidgety, Lady Mildred was looking anxious, Mr. Turner had fallen sound asleep, and this humble chronicler was well-nigh worn out with desperate efforts to sustain a conversation which flickered and died the moment that it was left alone.

At length Lord Staines returned. He had been making hay with his hair, from which I concluded that he had failed to discover any arithmetical process by which the greater can be subtracted from the less; and unless I greatly misjudged him, his inward ejaculation on seeing us was, "What! not gone yet!" But he was far too polite to utter any words to that effect, and he discoursed amiably until Bracknell and Hilda re-appeared, which they did without the least symptom of embarrassment on either side. Then old Turner woke up suddenly, rubbed his hands, and said that they had had a delightful evening, but that they really mustn't keep the carriage waiting any longer; whereupon we all wished one another

good-night with much alacrity, and the party broke up.

Jim's dog-cart was at the door, and he had promised to give me a lift home; but as I was putting on my overcoat in the hall, he followed me and said, "Do you mind waiting a quarter of an hour, Harry? I should like to smoke a cigar with Bracknell before we go."

Of course I replied that I didn't mind at all, and accordingly we adjourned to the smoking-room, whither Lord Staines did not accompany us. I don't think I have ever met any one quite so straightforward as Jim. It never occurred to him to approach any subject by a little introductory beating about the bush, as almost all of us do. If he had anything to say to you, you might be quite certain that he would say every word of it, and lose no time about doing so either. His cigar was hardly alight before he had explained matters to Bracknell in the most unequivocal language.

"Look here, Bracknell, old chap," said he, "I don't want you to flirt with Hilda Turner. We are all friends here, so I don't mind telling you that I mean to ask her to be my wife, though I'd rather you didn't speak about it to any one else just yet."

Something in this announcement seemed to tickle Bracknell amazingly; for his mirth was so immoderate and so prolonged that Jim felt constrained at last to add: "It isn't a joke."

"Oh yes it is, my dear boy," returned the other still laughing: "It's a first-rate joke, if you could only see it. Be advised by me, Jim, and drop that young woman like a hot potato. She's not the wife for you."

"That's as may be," rejoined Jim quietly; "but at all events she is not the wife for you."

"I should rather think she wasn't! The wife for me is a lady with 50,000*l.* of her own. Of course it would be desirable that she should have more; but 50,000*l.* is the irreducible minimum; the governor has just been telling me so. By the way, do you think the fair Hilda is going to accept you?"

Jim, with a becoming blush, admitted that he was sanguine.

"Well, she *may*. Five thousand a year is not to be sneezed at in these hard times; and I suppose you're worth all that, aren't you?"

Jim got up and leant with his back against the mantelpiece. "Do you know, Bracknell," said he, "I don't like that way of talking. I am sure you have no intention of hurting my feelings; but, you see, it isn't pleasant to me to hear Hilda spoken of—"

"As if she resembled other women? All right, Jim; I'll spare your feelings for the future, and I don't think I'll marry Miss Turner, thank you. I suppose I may sometimes speak to her though?"

"Of course you may," replied Jim, quite

gravely. If you tell me that you won't flirt with her, that's all I want. Only, don't you see what I mean? If you began to pay attention to Hilda, or to any other woman, what possible chance could I have? It stands to reason that I should have none. I'm neither good-looking nor clever, nor—nor anything. Why, I wouldn't even venture to pit myself against Harry Maynard!"

And with this homage to his friend's irresistible attractions and incidental acknowledgment of my own, Jim resumed his seat.

Bracknell was a little flattered, I think, and perhaps also (though I am not quite so sure about that) a little touched. "Go on and prosper," said he. "Marriage is the greatest mistake in the world; but if you will marry, you will. Let me know when the event comes off, and I'll be your best man."

It is not always easy to tell how far the sense of duty and honour possessed by men like Bracknell may be relied upon. Doubtless there are certain offences against their fellow-men which they would under no circumstances commit; but as for the rest, I should imagine that it was very much a question of temptation. Truth compels me to admit that the temptations with which Hilda assailed the heir of Staines Court during the next few weeks were of a nature to try the stoutest powers of resistance. I don't say that her tactics were novel; but I do say that anything

more clever than her employment of them I never saw. Of course "the young people," as we were generically termed by our elders, were continually together. There were rides, there were picnics, there was lawn-tennis—in short, all the ordinary amusements of country-house life in the summer-time; and to watch Hilda and Bracknell together on those occasions would have been most entertaining if it had not been a little distressing. She stirred his curiosity; she roused in him a spirit of emulation; she flattered his vanity one day only to wound it the next. Sometimes she ignored him as obstinately as she had done the first evening; and every now and again when Jim's back was turned, she would favour him with a look which I am quite sure must have sent a thrill through his whole person, though he had the credit of being accustomed to such looks. All this time she was charming in her demeanour to poor old Jim, with whom, however, she now avoided taking solitary walks; and the upshot of it was that, before a fortnight had passed, she had two sighing lovers at her feet instead of one. That may not have been a very wonderful exploit to accomplish, nevertheless it was accomplished with very great skill.

How matters must end was obvious enough; yet when the catastrophe (for I suppose it must be called a catastrophe) came, I confess I was slightly startled. It was Mr. Turner who apprised me of it. Strolling out in the direction of Staines Court one

hot morning, I came upon him just as he was hurrying through the gates, and he at once pulled up, took off his hat, and began to mop his forehead. Evidently he was a prey to conflicting emotions; and indeed his first words were a confession that such was the case.

"My dear Harry," said he, "I am upset—completely upset. Tell me now—for you have an old head upon young shoulders—did it ever strike you that there was anything between my daughter and Lord Bracknell?"

I replied that that idea had suggested itself to me.

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Mr. Turner. "Dear me! Well, I assure you that I never was more taken aback in my life than when Lord Bracknell came to me last night to tell me that he had proposed to Hilda and had been accepted. Ah, I see that you are astonished. The fact is that I had formed other—ahem!—anticipations. Possibly you may have shared those anticipations?"

I signified assent, and he went on: "To tell you the truth, Harry, I should have been better pleased if things had fallen out otherwise. Even now I am not sure—However, we shall see. I have just received a note from Lord Staines, requesting me to call upon him immediately, and I greatly fear that he will not be favourable to the engagement. You are very observant, I know: have you noticed any signs of his being disposed to—er—welcome dear Hilda as his daughter-in-law?"

I was quite unable to say that I had, and I really felt very sorry for the poor man, who seemed, through no fault of his own, to have got between the upper and the nether millstones. Nothing was more certain than that he was about to get into serious trouble with the patron of his living, and it might be safely predicted that, when he returned home, he would get into trouble not less serious with the controller of his household and his actions. I quite understood why he begged me not to mention this to *anybody*, and also who was meant by that emphatic "anybody": for a squire in the hand is worth two viscounts in the bush. I willingly gave him the required assurance, and he hastened away towards the house, fanning himself with his pocket-handkerchief as he went.

CHAPTER III.

LORD STAINES was a weak man, and, like most weak men, was exceedingly peremptory when roused to anger. It was certainly not poor Mr. Turner's fault that Bracknell had been brought within an ace of making an egregious ass of himself; for, as everybody knew, Mr. Turner had no more control over his daughter than he had over the Empress of China. Still, those who are invested with nominal authority should expect to be held responsible when disasters occur; and a sad pity it is that this excellent rule is not more frequently made to apply to certain high functionaries whom one might name. Lord Staines, having got hold of Hilda's ostensible superior, led the unhappy man into his study and then and there gave him a tremendous wigging. I made a point of calling upon the Reverend Simeon in the course of the afternoon, and found him quite shattered. Never in his life before, he said piteously, had such language been used to him, and although it was his duty as

a Christian to forgive Lord Staines's words, he feared that it would be long before he would be able to forget them.

As for Bracknell, he was packed off by the first train with a flea in his ear, and, I dare say, a cheque in his pocket. He wrote a letter to Hilda, in which, as I understood, he represented himself to be broken-hearted, but powerless. His father wouldn't hear of the engagement, and, since he was entirely dependent upon his father, there was no more to be said. Upon reflection, I feel quite sure that he must have received a cheque. Lord Staines possessed a fine old-fashioned temper, but he worshipped his son, whose will was a great deal stronger than his own, and if Bracknell had really been determined upon marrying the cook, I doubt not but that he would have snapped his fingers in his father's face and married her. Such may not improbably have been also the opinion of the fair Hilda, whose wrath at finding herself thus coolly left in the lurch was, as I gathered from her father, very great.

Her disappointment might have been easier to bear, and the whole affair might have blown over quietly, if only Lord Staines had had the sense to hold his tongue about it. But I suppose he was flushed with victory and couldn't hold his tongue. First he told Lady Mildred, which was perhaps unavoidable; later in the day, by which time he had fully recovered his good humour, he marched

down to see my mother and boasted a little of the facility with which he had nipped this folly and nonsense in the bud.

"Rely upon it, my dear Mrs. Maynard," said he, "there is nothing like promptitude and decision in these cases. People tell me that I have over-indulged Bracknell, and possibly I have; but I believe he understands pretty well that there are certain limits which he had better not transgress. I can't afford to have a pauper daughter-in-law, and there's an end of it."

My mother said it was all very worldly and shocking, and that if Lord Staines had nothing worse than lack of fortune to urge against Hilda, he ought to be ashamed of himself. However, he was not at all ashamed of himself, and I take it that he must have gone about freely extolling the virtue of promptitude and decision, for in a few days the whole neighbourhood was in possession of the facts, together with such emendations and additions as individual taste had grafted on to them in the process of transmission.

Among the first to be informed of what had occurred was Jim, who rode over to our house in a great state of heat to ask me whether I had heard what he was pleased to call "an infernal lying report." When I was obliged to tell him that the report alluded to, however infernal it might be, was substantially correct, I really thought for a moment that he was going to hit me between

the eyes. But he renounced that intention, if he had ever entertained it, and only dropped into a chair, with a look of pain and reproach on his face which hurt me almost as much as if I had deserved it.

"And you knew that Bracknell was humbugging me all this time?" he exclaimed.

I had not said so, but the fact was undeniable. I fancy that, upon the first blush of the thing, he was more grieved by Bracknell's treachery than by Hilda's inconstancy, and I could not get him to pay much attention to the excuses which I made both for the culprit and for myself; though I venture to think that these were neither intrinsically poor nor badly put. But when, in the plenitude of my generosity, I began to make excuses for Hilda too, he stopped me at once—

"That's enough, Harry," he interrupted. "You mean well; but you don't seem to see that apologising on Hilda's behalf is implying that she is to blame. I can't admit that for an instant. She never gave me anything in the shape of a promise; and if I chose to imagine that she cared for me, the more fool I."

"Well, perhaps so," I agreed. "Anyhow, it's very evident that she did *not* care for you."

"Yes," he replied, sighing; "that's evident, I suppose. And yet I can't help thinking that she might have cared for me if Bracknell hadn't come down. But there's no good in talking about that

now. I shall be off somewhere for the next few months, I think. You couldn't be persuaded to come with me to Switzerland, and perhaps spend the winter in Italy, could you?"

I reminded him that I was not a man of independent fortune, and that my winter would have to be spent in the less agreeable atmosphere of Lincoln's Inn, where I had already taken chambers; but I strongly advised him to go away and travel. He had so many friends that he was not likely to be left long without a companion. I fear that he did not find me very sympathetic; and in truth it was all I could do to restrain myself from openly congratulating him upon his escape.

Presently he said that if my mother was well enough to receive him, he would just go and say good morning to her, and I knew better than to accompany him to her room. From that quarter those who were afflicted in mind, body, or estate, could always count upon obtaining sympathy, if not comfort; and sure enough, when Jim emerged, after an interview of half an hour, he looked so much less inclined to hang himself that I was afraid my mother had committed the imprudence of advising him to try again. But that, it appeared, was a groundless alarm.

"Oh, no," he said quietly, in answer to my inquiry, "she didn't give me any hope. She was awfully kind though, and I believe it's quite true that I shall get over this some day. Only I

wish Bracknell had been a little more straight about it."

Well, upon the whole, that seemed to be a very proper spirit in which to meet adversity, and I accompanied my friend down stairs, hoping that, after all, he might not be quite as hard hit as I had supposed. But when we reached the front-door, whom should we find talking affably to the groom and caressing Jim's horse, but Miss Hilda Turner in person!

Jim started violently, while I, for my part, inwardly commended her to the devil; for I could not doubt her purpose in waiting outside in that unseemly way.

"Why did you not come in?" I asked with a touch of asperity. "I presume you called to see my mother, didn't you?"

"I did," she replied calmly, and never so much as changed colour; "but when I saw Jim's horse at the door, I thought I would wait for him and call on Mrs. Maynard some other day. I know it tires her to have more than one visitor at a time. Jim, if you have nothing better to do, you might walk home with me."

"Good Heavens!" thought I to myself, "is she going to propose to him?" I took the liberty of raising my eyebrows ostentatiously, but I doubt whether any evolutions which I could have induced my eyebrows to perform would have disturbed her equanimity. She met my gaze

with perfect composure, and it was I, not she, who eventually had to look the other way.

The countenance of that foolish Jim expressed mingled surprise, pleasure, and doubt. What was the good of my giving him a surreptitious dig in the back and making grimaces at him when he turned round? Hilda had but to beckon to him and he would have gone with her to the world's end. He went with her unhesitatingly to the end of our short avenue, leading his horse; and there they were lost to my gaze. But it was not necessary to be gifted with second sight in order to feel tolerably sure of what was taking place between them after they had vanished; and I returned to the study of the law with misgivings which were only too soon to be justified. An hour or so later, while I was immersed in pleadings, and was cumbering my brain with the absurd jargon of replications, rejoinders, surrejoinders, rebutters, and the like, I heard somebody ride full gallop up to the house, immediately after which my door was burst open, as by a charge of dynamite, and Jim, victorious and triumphant, stood before me once more. One glance at his face was sufficient to show me that it was all up with him.

"You needn't go into ecstasies," I said snappishly; "I know all about it."

"Now, my dear Harry," he remonstrated, "how can you possibly know all about it?"

"At least," said I, "I know that you are engaged to Hilda Turner."

He gave me to understand in reply that such was indeed his good fortune. "And do you know," he continued, "the truth is—it's so glorious that I can hardly believe it, and yet I feel somehow as if I had always been sure of it—the truth is that she has loved me all along!"

"Then," I could not help remarking, "she took the very oddest way of showing her affection that ever I heard of."

Jim said, "Not at all odd; the same kind of thing has often happened before, as everybody knows. It all arose out of my stupid bashfulness. She naturally thought that I couldn't care much about her, since I wouldn't speak out; and so when Bracknell made his offer she accepted him. She says she would have accepted anybody under the circumstances—and I can quite understand it."

Obviously reasoning would be thrown away upon such a lunatic; nevertheless, to set myself straight with my conscience, I endeavoured to reason with him.

"It appears, then," said I, "that she sought you out in order to avow her love. If she was not too proud to do that to-day, why in the world couldn't she have done it a few weeks ago?"

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Jim, "what a low opinion you have of your fellow creatures!

Sought me out indeed! Why, my dear fellow, you wouldn't believe what trouble I had to extort the truth from her. What she sought me out for—not that she did seek me out—was to beg me to try and make peace between her father and old Staines. That, of course, led us to speak about Bracknell, and then I couldn't help telling her how long I had loved her, and then at last she admitted that she had only promised to marry him out of pique. But she was very unwilling to accept me, I can tell you. Harry, old chap, you don't know Hilda; she's the sweetest girl in England!"

If she was, I certainly did not know her; but to make such a rejoinder as that would only have been to expose myself to a surrejoinder which it would have been altogether futile to attempt to rebut; so I said what was expected of me with as good a grace as I could command, and as soon as Jim was gone I kicked those odious law books to the other end of the room, in token alike of my abhorrence for them individually, and of my disgust with a state of things which I was powerless to remedy.

CHAPTER IV.

It has ever been my wish to look with an impartial eye alike upon the just and upon the unjust. Being, I hope, to some extent conscious of my own small failings and very desirous that full credit should be allowed to me for my virtues, it is but fair that I should acknowledge the virtues of those whom I dislike, if by diligent searching I can discover that they possess any. And so I am really glad to be able to say for Hilda Turner that I believe she was as fond of Jim as it was in her nature to be of anybody. This concession may the more readily be made because, to tell the truth, it does not amount to much when looked into. Other things being equal, she would, I take it, have preferred Jim to Bracknell; but other things were not equal, because Bracknell was a viscount, who would some day be an earl, whereas Jim would assuredly never be anything but a moderately well-to-do country squire. Still I am bound to confess that when her

first string broke she took up her second with a very good grace. Whether, as I suspected at the time, she precipitated her engagement by way of conveying a slap in the face to the too dutiful Bracknell, or whether she had got wind of Jim's proposed exodus and feared to lose him altogether by delay, certain it is that she bore herself with dignity and general amiability in a situation which must have been somewhat embarrassing, and also that she made Jim supremely happy. More than that could not reasonably have been required of her.

The young couple were, to all appearance, thoroughly satisfied with one another, and their satisfaction was very commonly, if not quite universally, shared by their friends and relatives. Old Turner rubbed his plump white hands, and declared that the wish of his heart was now fulfilled; Lord Staines was so delighted that he could not rest until he had walked over to the Rectory and announced his delight; and my mother, though secretly a little disappointed (for Jim was a great favourite of hers), did not hesitate to aver that all was for the best. It is true that she would have said and thought the self-same thing if she had just heard me sentenced to be hanged by the neck until I was dead—such being her simple creed. Taking her stand upon certain passages of Scripture, she boldly asserted that it was not for us to judge whether this or that event would be productive of ultimate good

or not, and, in short, adopted without reservation the doctrine that whatever is is right.

To fall in with my dear mother's views in this respect has never been possible to me, and amid the general chorus of approval I found some comfort in listening to a dissentient voice which harmonised with my own. It was a very quiet little voice, but it was a sweet one, and was seldom used to utter disparaging remarks about anybody. "Since you ask me," Lady Mildred said, "I am not glad, I am sorry. It seems to me that Hilda is not good enough for Mr. Leigh."

"That," I observed, "is beyond all question."

"Yes; and I don't understand her changing her mind so quickly. Of course it was impossible that Bracknell should marry her; but if it had been possible they might have got on together well enough, perhaps. I am fonder of Bracknell than of anybody else in the world, and I don't know that she is exactly good enough for him either. But he is different from Mr. Leigh. I mean that if he had found out afterwards that Hilda was not quite—quite what he had fancied her, I don't think he would have taken it so much to heart."

These were precisely my sentiments; but as no one had the remotest intention of consulting either me or Lady Mildred, we could not do better than keep them to ourselves; and we kept them to ourselves accordingly.

Of Bracknell I heard nothing, nor, I suppose, did Jim receive congratulations from that quarter, although I did not like to ask him the question. No doubt he had forgiven his old friend, as he could well afford to do, being more or less in the position of a conqueror. His marriage was appointed to take place in the ensuing month of January, and soon after hearing of this arrangement I left home to be formally called to the bar and to take possession of the chambers, where I am thankful to say that my legal library has remained unconsulted from that day to this. For then it was that I received my first substantial encouragement to persevere with those literary labours which have since made life pleasant to me, and have even enabled me to afford an occasional pat of butter with my bread.

During the autumn and early winter my mother, who writes the most delightful letters that ever were penned by mortal hand, kept me fully informed of all that was going on down at Cranfield; and by her account all was going on quite as it ought. Jim, assisted by the counsels of the bride-elect, was re-furnishing Elmhurst from attic to basement; his uncle and aunt, a very uninteresting old couple, whom nobody ever saw, and whom nobody but my mother would have dreamt of regretting, had already taken their departure for Bath, where they proposed to reside in future; "and dear Mildred," my mother added, "is be-

having *so* sweetly about it all. She seems quite to share Jim's happiness, and some day, I hope, she herself will be as happy as she deserves to be." I confess that the significance of the above encomium escaped me at the time; although I certainly might have perceived it if I had not been a little dense.

A few days before Christmas I seated myself in the down express from Paddington, being bound for Cranfield, with the twofold object of spending that festive season at home and assisting at Jim's subsequent nuptials. Just as the train was starting a young man of fashionable exterior jumped into the carriage, tumbled over my legs, apologised, and then said, "Oh, it's you, Maynard, is it? Going down to the old shop?"

I replied that such was my destination, but that I presumed it wasn't his—not that I really presumed anything of the kind, but because I thought that, taking everything into consideration, Bracknell would have shown better taste by remaining absent from the paternal abode at that particular juncture.

"Oh, yes, I'm going to Staines Court," he returned. "Why shouldn't I?"

"If you don't know, I'm sure I don't," I answered.

"My dear fellow," said Bracknell, lighting a cigar, "if you were to be bound to avoid every woman with whom you have ever been in love,

your life would be a perpetual game of hide-and-seek. In fact, the thing really couldn't be done. How is that dear old duffer Jim getting on? Lord! what an existence he has before him! It was a bad day for him when the governor refused to let me take Miss Hilda off his hands. That girl will end by breaking his heart, you'll see."

"She does not," I observed, "appear to have broken yours."

Bracknell smiled, but it struck me that he also winced ever so slightly. "Women are all the same," said he; "a man who allowed one of them to break his heart would be a great fool. Jim is a great fool."

"If being too chivalrous for the world that we live in is being a fool, he certainly is one," I agreed; and I hardly know what prompted me to add, "I hope you will always be as loyal to him as he is to you, Bracknell."

It was rather a silly speech to make, and perhaps also rather an impertinent one, but Bracknell did not appear to resent it. He stared for a moment, and then said, "I suppose he didn't like my cutting him out, eh? It was rough upon him, I admit; but how the deuce was I to help it?"

Being unable to make any concise reply to that question, I only answered, "Well, it is all over now, and the less said about it the better."

So, by way of changing the subject, my companion began to entertain me with an account of

a steeplechase in which he had recently taken part, and this, with occasional breaks, lasted us to our journey's end.

I should have liked to witness the meeting between Bracknell and Hilda, but that pleasure was denied me. On Christmas Day I dined at Staines Court, my mother, who was unable to leave her room, insisting upon my accepting the invitation which had been sent to me to join the party assembled there. The house was full of Henleys and Beauchamps, relations of Lord Staines's, who were unknown to me; but the very first thing that I saw on entering the drawing-room was a little group, composed of Hilda, Lady Mildred, Bracknell, and Jim. They were conversing together in the most friendly manner, and had evidently made up their minds to let bygones be bygones. Jim beckoned to me, and very soon drew me aside to whisper, "Isn't Bracknell a good fellow? I don't believe there's another man in England who would have taken things as he has done and come down here just to show us that he bears no malice!"

It might be that Bracknell had come to Staines Court for that amiable purpose, but I had some difficulty in supposing it. In the first place, he can hardly have thought that any one would suspect him of bearing malice, and in the second, he might so easily have written a letter calculated to allay such apprehensions. There, however, he was, chatting to Hilda as unconcernedly as ever; and

even if he was bent upon mischief—which, after all, did not seem very likely—it was certain that Jim would never believe it of him.

Miss Turner was not suffered to retain possession of him long. I think I have already mentioned that Bracknell was one of those happy (one must presume that they are happy) men whom frisky young matrons delight to honour. There were several ladies among the company who answered to that description, and they skirmished over him in a manner diverting to behold, and flattering, no doubt, to the subject of their strife. Between them they bore him away, a not unwilling victim, and until the evening was far advanced we country neighbours could only admire him from afar. Lord Staines, twirling his grey moustache, watched his son's triumph with a benign smile. Probably he had no objection to Bracknell's flirting with any number of ladies, so long as they were not unmarried and penniless. He himself was looking younger and more cheerful than he had done in the summer, having, as I learnt in the course of a brief interview with Lady Mildred, landed a handsome sum over the Cesarewitch.

At a late hour somebody—I suppose it must have been Bracknell—suggested a game of pool. About ten of us, including two or three ladies, adjourned to the billiard-room, and then it was that I was able to take a few mental notes of Hilda's demeanour towards her former lover. Her

position was not a very comfortable one; because everybody in the room knew that she had consented to marry Bracknell only a few months before, and she must have known quite well that they knew it. Her serenity, however, was not ruffled, nor did she fall into any of the mistakes which she might so easily have made, and which a woman of more feeling could hardly have avoided making. She neither shunned Bracknell nor thrust herself upon his notice; she was neither over-friendly with him nor the reverse. When he spoke to her she answered him civilly and once or twice she even addressed him first, but indeed she was in an unusually quiet mood and spoke very little to anybody. If there was a criticism to be made upon her, it might have been that she was just a trifle too affectionate with Jim, whispering a word or two in his ear occasionally, as she passed round the table, and glancing quickly at him for applause whenever she had achieved a brilliant stroke.

After the game had been going on for some little time Bracknell came and threw himself down on the sofa beside me. "By George!" he exclaimed, in an undertone which had a ring of vexation in it, "that girl has no more heart than a stone!"

"That," replied I, "is no news to me and no business of yours."

"And to think," he went on, without heeding my remark, "that she has spent the whole of her

life in a country parsonage! So much for rural simplicity! Why, there isn't one of these Belgravian women who could hold a candle to her for coolness!"

I don't know what he had expected her to say or do; but he was evidently annoyed, and added that he wouldn't be in Jim's shoes for a trifle. He was obliging me with his views upon feminine nature in general, which, I am sorry to say, were too disrespectful and too crudely expressed to bear repetition, when somebody called out to him that it was his turn to play.

He had a long and rather difficult shot to make, and at the instant when he was drawing back his cue Hilda all of a sudden stepped close behind him, so that he struck her sharply in the side with the butt end of it. She gave a little cry and fell back upon the sofa where I was sitting. Bracknell, full of apologies and alarm, dropped his cue and peered anxiously at the blanched cheeks of the sufferer; Jim came tearing up from the other end of the room; somebody ran for a glass of water; the rest of the players crowded round the sofa, and we had quite a little scene. At length Hilda got back her breath, and, smiling faintly, assured us that she was not really hurt.

"It is nothing—nothing at all," she said. "It was my own fault entirely, and I shall be all right in a few minutes. Please go on with the game and don't look at me."

To this day I can't feel sure that she did it on purpose. If she did, I am glad to think that she received a considerably smarter dig in the ribs than she had bargained for. In any case, this trifling incident had the effect of producing a complete alteration in Bracknell's humour. He was naturally concerned at having hurt a lady, and it may be that his self-reproach was increased by the recollection that he had been saying hard things of her the minute before. He remained sitting beside her after she had gently pushed Jim away, and the others, at her request, had resumed their game, and I saw that a rapid interchange of words took place between them. Their colloquy was soon interrupted; but it had lasted long enough to bring a slightly increased colour into Bracknell's cheeks and a pensive look into his eyes. Knowing what I did of Miss Hilda, I was convinced that she must either wish to subjugate him once more or to avenge herself upon him; and, all things considered, there seemed to be a very fair chance of her succeeding in her aim, whatever that might be.

When I said as much to my mother on the following morning, after giving her the full account which she always likes to have of what had taken place at the dinner-party and after it, she shook her head. "Ah, my dear Harry," she sighed, "you are too ready to seek for bad motives and study bad people—that is, if poor Hilda is really

bad. If I were you, I should find it much more interesting to study Mildred. Is she too good to be attractive?"

"Are you suggesting that I should fall in love with Lady Mildred?" I inquired.

"My dear boy, no! What would Lord Staines say? Besides, I am afraid you would be a day too late. Have you really not discovered Mildred's secret, Harry?—you, who are so quick-sighted!"

We all have our weaknesses; and amongst the many to which I should have to plead guilty, if placed upon my oath, is that of fancying that I can read the hearts and minds of my neighbours with some facility. Now, in truth it had not occurred to me until then that Lady Mildred had lost her heart to Jim, but as I could not bear to admit my stupidity, I made no direct reply, merely observing that there was a difference between what was attractive and what was interesting to study, and that bad people were more interesting to study than good ones because, as a rule, their motives of action were more obscure.

"I suppose so," agreed my mother absently. "Poor Jim!"

"Really," said I (because I was provoked with her for having seen what I had failed to detect), "I do not understand why you should pity him. All is for the best in the best of possible worlds, you know."

"I believe that all is ordered for our good," she answered simply; "though I fear that you do not. We must not presume to say that it would have been better for our friend to marry Mildred than Hilda, who, after all, has a great deal that is nice about her. Poor Jim!"

My dear mother permits herself a touch of dry humour at times which, I think, refreshes her. She glanced up at me half deprecatingly after this last ejaculation, and we had a little laugh together. I suppose she perceived as plainly as I did that there was trouble coming, but she did not choose to talk about it before it came, and probably she was quite right.

CHAPTER V.

I AM but a poor equestrian and can only speak upon such subjects with the diffidence which beseems me, but I have always understood from those who ought to know that the hunting in our parts is of an inferior order. The covert-shooting, on the other hand, is fairly good, and that belonging to the Staines Court property may almost be called famous. Now Lord Staines had left his coverts untouched until Christmas, being, as I verily believe, instigated to this act of self-denial by a desire to please his heir, who at that time was one of the best shots in England. Great, therefore, must have been his surprise, and great also his disappointment on finding that Bracknell preferred to follow the hounds during his stay, and that he could not even be persuaded to take his gun out of its case on non-hunting days.

"It seems to me," the poor old gentleman declared in my hearing, "that he must have taken leave of his senses. I really can't account for his behaviour in any other way."

I could have accounted for it; though I am not prepared to say that my explanation excluded the hypothesis of insanity. I could have told Lord Staines that, indifferent as the hunting was, there was a certain country gentleman in the neighbourhood who was devoted to it, heart and soul; that this gentleman had recently presented a well-broken saddle-horse to his betrothed; and further, that when Bracknell was not out hunting with the couple aforesaid he was amusing himself in some other and perhaps less innocent fashion in the company of one of them. But I did not tell him this, partly because I was not asked and partly because I am constitutionally averse to being blown up sky high. I will do myself the justice to say that I would have risked a good deal of personal discomfort to get Bracknell dismissed a second time from the neighbourhood; but I was well aware that nothing short of ocular proof would have made Lord Staines believe his son capable of behaviour unworthy of a gentleman. To make love to your friend's *fiancée* under your friend's nose must undoubtedly be described in that disagreeable way; and I hardly think that the circumstance of the lady in question being an unscrupulous minx can be admitted as an extenuating one.

If any palliation of Bracknell's conduct had been discoverable, I suppose one would have had to look for it in the tone of the society which he

was accustomed to frequent. In certain sets it seems to be almost imperative upon a man that he should make love to somebody, provided always that she be not a person whom he can marry. Bracknell may have opined that Miss Turner was as good as married already, and that she was consequently a safe and fit subject for his attentions. For the rest, she gave him every encouragement. I used to meet them riding home from hunting together at a suspiciously early hour of the day; Bracknell was for ever dropping in to luncheon or tea at the Rectory; and Jim had no words to express his satisfaction at the good feeling which subsisted between his friend and his future wife. He confided to me that he had hardly ventured to hope for such a happy state of things.

When the hunting was abruptly put a stop to by a sharp frost, which in a few days rendered the ice on the great lake at Staines Court thick enough to bear, this estimable pair had further opportunities of showing how well disposed they were towards one another. Bracknell excelled in skating, as indeed he did in all sports and pastimes of an athletic nature; and in Hilda he found an apt pupil. Jim, who was by no means such a proficient, would listen respectfully to Bracknell's instructions, and when the couple skimmed away from him, as they often did, would watch them from afar, with pride and admiration

in his eyes. They were the two people whom he loved best in the world, and I believe it gave him far more pleasure to contemplate their achievements than it would have done to obtain any kind of personal distinction.

For reasons of my own, I usually prefer to shun the giddy throng when on skates. One afternoon I had found a nice sequestered spot, screened from view by an island, and was very busy practising a graceful piece of figure-skating (outside edge forwards, inside edge backwards, and then down with a thump) when Bracknell and Hilda suddenly shot out from behind the clump of evergreen shrubs which had masked my movements. They swept past me, hand in hand, and in that still atmosphere a few words fell clear and distinct upon my ear. "Oh, *what* a bore! Can't we get rid of him somehow?" And then a low laugh from Hilda and a reply which distance rendered unintelligible to me.

An instant later came the sound of short, scuffling strokes, denoting the approach of an unskilful skater, and Jim's colossal form loomed into view. "Hi! you two," I heard him shout. "Wait for me!" And away he went, full tilt, round the miniature cape which Bracknell and Hilda had already doubled.

I hardly know why this brief dissolving view should have set my blood boiling with indignation, for I really had not been in need of any further

evidence that poor Jim was being made a fool of; but so it was. "Oh, you would like to get rid of him, would you?" said I to myself, starting off in pursuit. "Then, my good friends, you sha'n't get rid of him, nor of me either."

However, I was prevented from carrying out my benevolent intentions; for I had not got well under way before I encountered Jim, returning post-haste.

"Where are you off to in such a hurry?" I asked, holding up my hand to stop him.

He checked his career with some difficulty, describing an immense semicircle in order to bring up alongside of me. "Hilda wants her jacket," he explained, breathlessly; "she has left it up at the house."

"And she has despatched you a mile to fetch it! One would have thought that she might have sent Bracknell. But never mind. You go back to her; I'll get her confounded jacket."

I could not help confounding her jacket, but I saw that Jim was a little surprised and displeased at my doing so. "My dear boy," he said gently, "there's no occasion for you to give yourself all that bother. I don't mind going."

"Well, then," I returned, provoked beyond the limits of prudence, "*I* mind your going. Heavens and earth, man, do you imagine that it is because she is afraid of catching cold that Hilda orders you off on an errand which will take you a good three

quarters of an hour to accomplish? Do you suppose, by any chance, that Bracknell has stayed down here all this time because he enjoys third-class hunting, or because he thinks skating on a pond better fun than disporting himself in London? It is not permissible to be so stupid!"

Jim's face became very grave. "Bracknell is staying here to be present at our wedding," he replied; "he has given up a lot of other engagements rather than disappoint us. As for Hilda, I may tell you that she wouldn't have let me get her jacket for her if I hadn't insisted upon it." He added, with something of an effort: "Harry, we're old friends, and I'd stand a great deal from you before I'd quarrel with you; but I'm bound to say that if you make such an insinuation as that again, we can't be friends any longer. I suppose you have got into a habit of suspecting that every man you meet may be a rascal, and now you can't help yourself. I don't want to preach to you, old chap, but it's a beastly bad habit to have got into, and that's the truth."

Such was the reward that I obtained for my well-meant, but injudicious meddling. I am sorry to say that I was foolish enough to feel deeply affronted by Jim's rebuke, and a coolness arose between us which might not have been easily dispelled, had not subsequent events drawn us together again. It was, at all events, pretty evident that, so far as I was concerned, matters

must be allowed to take their course. I could not open Jim's eyes, and to remonstrate with Bracknell would have been sheer waste of breath.

Somebody was found, however, with sufficient faith in him and in herself to attempt this useless task. It was some days after the ice had broken up, and when we were within a week of Jim's wedding-day, that demure little Lady Mildred told me how uneasy the intimacy of her brother with the bride elect was making her. "I don't mind talking to you about it," she said, "because I know you have seen it all as plainly as I have. I suppose you blame Bracknell very much, do you not?"

"Why, of course I do," I replied.

"Yes; but he is not really so bad as you think—he does not see anything wrong in it. He only laughed when I spoke to him, and said I didn't know what I was talking about. And so it will go on until something dreadful happens."

"My dear Lady Mildred," said I, "I don't think anything dreadful will happen. If I know the charming Hilda at all, she will always stop a little short of dreadful things. People who do dreadful things lose their place in society and have to put up with all manner of inconveniences. She will contrive to amuse herself, no doubt, but so long as her husband shuts his eyes and doesn't mind, what can that matter to anybody?"

Lady Mildred did not seem pleased with my

philosophy. "That is as much as to say that you care very little what becomes of your friend," she observed.

"Quite so," I returned, keeping my temper. "When I venture to speak a word in season to my friend, he flies at me like a bull-dog, and tells me to mind my own business; when I leave him alone, you reproach me with caring very little about him. At this rate, a friend seems likely to prove a troublesome luxury."

The truth was that I trembled for poor Jim's future quite as much as Lady Mildred did, but when things are inevitable what can a wise man do but make the best of them? My confidence in Hilda's discretion was quite sincere; and that only shows how mistaken the wisest of us may be every now and then. Could I—could anybody—anticipate what the next move of that remarkable young woman was going to be? Anyhow, none of us did anticipate it.

A few days before that on which the wedding had been appointed to take place, I was invited to luncheon at the Rectory, it having been intimated to me that I should be expected to make myself useful subsequently in helping to move furniture and carry out other preparations for the feast at which Mr. Turner proposed to entertain his friends after the ceremony. When I arrived I found Jim and Mr. Sparks, the curate, seated in the drawing-room with our host, but Hilda was

conspicuous by her absence. Her absence had become quite disagreeably conspicuous when the clock struck half-past two, by which time we were all very hungry, besides having reached the extreme limit of our subjects of conversation. In the course thereof it had transpired that Bracknell had come over in his dog-cart two or three hours before, and had persuaded Hilda to go out for a drive with him. "But she assured me," said Mr. Turner, fidgeting about uneasily, "that she would be back very shortly, and I am altogether at a loss to account for this delay."

"Oh, they'll turn up all right," returned Jim composedly. "Bracknell never knows what time of day it is. I don't think they deserve that we should wait any longer for them, though."

Here the curate, a good-natured but not very intelligent young man, judged it appropriate to remark, with a loud laugh, "Upon my word, Mr. Leigh, you will have to look after this young lady. It's early days for her to begin driving off with a gay bachelor and finding his company so agreeable that she forgets to come home to luncheon."

After this graceful sally on the part of Sparks, we went into the dining-room and refreshed ourselves; but we listened in vain for the sound of Bracknell's chariot-wheels, and at length Jim, whose lawyer was coming down from London to see him, was compelled to leave us. His composure remained undisturbed up to the last; but

as soon as he was gone Mr. Turner confided to me that he, for his part, was becoming seriously alarmed.

"I would not mention it while James was here," he said, "but it struck me that Lord Bracknell was driving a somewhat restive animal, and I cannot help fearing that some accident has occurred."

If any accident had occurred within ten miles of us, we should certainly have heard of it by that time, and so I told him, but he was not convinced; and as the poor old fellow was evidently fretting himself into a fever, I could but offer to scour the country in search of the absentees. Accordingly I set out in one direction while the good-natured Sparks trudged away in another; and a very disagreeable walk I had of it through the rain, which began to come down immediately after I started. None of the people whom I met had seen Bracknell, upon whose head I did not invoke a blessing when I reached home after dark, drenched to the skin. I was perfectly sure that neither he nor Hilda had come to any physical harm; because persons of that kind very rarely get their necks broken (unless it be by the hand of the public executioner, and that only if they happen to belong to the lower orders), but I did think that between them they were carrying impudence about as far as it could very well be carried. However, as I did not at that time

foresee that I should ever write the history of these delinquents, I ceased to think about them as soon as I had finished my dinner, and, having made myself comfortable with a blazing fire and a cigar, set to work upon an article of which I hoped to have the skeleton completed before bed-time.

I was getting on quite nicely, and had scribbled down several epigrammatic sayings to be scattered carelessly over my composition and to cheer the persevering reader on his way through it, when I was informed that Mr. Turner was down stairs and wanted to see me "most particular." This announcement was speedily followed by the entrance of Mr. Turner himself, in an indescribable state of agitation. On seeing his pale face and rumpled hair, I naturally concluded that I had done Nemesis an injustice, and exclaimed, "*Has* there been an accident then after all?"

But he spread out his hands with a gesture of despair, and answered, "Ah, no! No accident—no accident! Design!" After which, he became so incoherent and unintelligible that I had to seat him in my arm-chair, and pour out a stiff brandy and soda for him. This he swallowed, throwing back his head and closing his eyes, as if it had been hemlock; and when he had drained the last drop of it, he felt in his pocket for a note, which he handed to me.

"Read that, Harry," said he tragically. "Read

it, my dear young friend, and tell me, if you can, what is to be done. Because I am willing to confess to you that what to do I know not at all!"

The note, which I perused with no small curiosity and astonishment, ran as follows:

"ROYAL HOTEL, STOKINGHAM.

"DEAR PAPA,—Lord Bracknell and I were married before the registrar here this morning. It is all quite legal and regular, of course; but we think we ought not to omit the religious ceremony, although circumstances have prevented us from going through it in the ordinary way; and so we propose to drive over early to-morrow morning and be married again *quite privately* by you. I am sure you will understand how advisable this is in order to prevent scandal, and I need not warn you that not a word must be said at Staines Court until it is all over and we have left again. Afterwards you can break the news to Lord Staines. Bracknell thinks his father will not have been made uneasy by his non-appearance, as he often runs up to London without mentioning that he is going to do so. Please tell Sarah that I shall want all my things packed up, and that she must begin doing it *at once*, and sit up all night, if necessary, as there is no time to lose. I have engaged another maid to meet us in London, and shall not take Sarah with me. Do not distress yourself about this sudden resolution of ours; you will see that all will come right in the end.

We shall be with you soon after nine o'clock to-morrow morning.

"Your affectionate daughter,

"HILDA BRACKNELL."

I can testify that the above is a strictly literal reproduction, because I wrote it down word for word, immediately after I had read it, thinking it worthy of remembrance as a curiosity in the way of epistolary composition. Never, I imagine, was a treacherous act avowed with more cynical effrontery. The writer seemed to have forgotten altogether that she had been engaged to be married in the course of a few days to an honest man who had the folly to adore her. One can't think of everything, and I suppose she was fully absorbed by the important considerations set forth in her letter. She was anxious to avoid unnecessary scandal; she did not wish to incur the discomfort of a stormy interview with Lord Staines, and she was determined not to part with her new clothes. If she had wandered away from these main points she might perhaps have confused her father's mind, which, to be sure, was not a very clear one.

I really could not see my way to offering that unlucky man much comfort. "If you wish for my opinion," I replied, when he repeated his demand, "I should say that you had better read the marriage service over them and then pack

them off with all despatch. After that, it will be your pleasing duty to impart the good news to Lord Staines, keeping well out of the reach of his arm while you do so. I don't know that it is any business of mine, but in common charity I will undertake Jim. May Heaven send us both a good deliverance!"

Mr. Turner sighed piteously, and declared that this would bring his grey hairs with sorrow to the grave. I was really sorry for him; for in truth his position was not an agreeable one; so I listened sympathetically while he bewailed himself for a time; but at length the habit of meek subordination which characterised him restored order to his ideas; he remembered that Sarah must be instructed to pack the trousseau forthwith, and, jumping up, trotted off homewards.

As soon as I had got rid of the Reverend Simeon, I went to bed. Nowadays I can take up my work and perform it with more or less of facility, whatever may be my mental condition; but I suppose that in earlier life I must have been less callous, for I felt that it would be out of the question to attack that unfinished article again while I could think of nothing but poor old Jim and the cruel blow which it would be my lot to strike him on the morrow. If any one who reads these lines has ever been obliged to kill a favourite dog, he will in some measure appreciate my sensations. The thing has to be done; it is necessary

and merciful to do it; but the necessity is a horrible one, and makes you feel, for the time being, very like a traitor and a murderer. Unfortunately, too, Jim and I were not upon the best of terms, by reason of that fruitless note of warning which I had thought proper to sound in his ear, and I knew that, in acquitting myself of my present mission, I should have the air of saying "I told you so!" Not that in reality I had foretold or foreseen what had occurred, for I had never dreamt that Hilda wished to marry Bracknell, nor, for that matter, that he would be so mad as to marry her if she did wish it; still it was plain that, under the circumstances, I should be an unwelcome ambassador; and as I lay broad awake, I almost regretted that I had not rather offered to face Lord Staines, who, if the worst came to the worst, could do no more than swear at me.

Being thus harassed, I naturally got little sleep that night, and was glad when the first glimmer of dawn gave me an excuse for getting up and stealing out of doors. I wandered about till breakfast time; but I did not go to church to witness the "religious ceremony" alluded to by Hilda, edifying though it would doubtless have been to watch the demeanour of the bride and bridegroom on that occasion.

CHAPTER VI.

As matters fell out, the task of enlightening Lord Staines was thrown upon my shoulders, in addition to that with which I had already saddled myself; for scarcely had I finished my breakfast when Mr. Turner arrived, trembling and breathless, to say that he really did not feel equal to encountering the brunt of his patron's wrath.

"Indeed," he added, with a ludicrous effort to regain his accustomed suave pomposity, "I am not sure that it would be right on my part to do so. I have not forgotten the very improper terms in which Lord Staines chose to address me when I called upon him once before on—er—a somewhat similar errand, and both for his sake and for my own, any repetition of such a scene is—er—to be deprecated. To you profanity of language would be less shocking—at least, I mean that you must be more accustomed to hearing it; and—er—in short—"

"In short," I interrupted, not over respectfully

—for really the reverend Simeon's aspect at that moment was not calculated to induce respect—"you want me to do your dirty work for you. Very well; I don't particularly mind; I may as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb. Only I don't promise to prevent Lord Staines from going down to the Rectory later in the day, and shocking you with profane language. It may not be altogether your fault that your daughter has disgraced herself and inveigled Bracknell into disgracing himself with her; but you may as well be prepared to be told that it is. If I were in your place I should be a good deal more frightened of Jim Leigh than of Lord Staines."

"Gently, my dear young friend, gently!" returned Mr. Turner with dignity "You are excited, and I do not blame you for it; but to say that my daughter has disgraced herself is to say too much—a great deal too much. That she did very wrong in engaging herself to James, I allow, and he will not find me slow to express my sincere sorrow and sympathy; but we must bear in mind that her affections were given in the first place to Lord Bracknell. I will not say that the young people were justified in taking the law into their own hands; yet I may doubt whether Lord Staines's motives for forbidding them to marry were of the highest kind. Now do not answer me, I beg of you. I can see that you are not yet master of yourself. If you will

allow me I will go up-stairs and sit with your dear mother while you walk over to Staines Court."

Evidently Hilda had been talking to him, and it would be absurd to waste good indignation upon such hopeless ineptitude.

"Pray do so, Mr. Turner," I answered, "my mother will be very glad to see you. Only I hope you will kindly refrain from expounding your views with regard to your daughter's marriage to her, because she is rather subject to attacks of nausea."

With this valedictory shot, I set out to perform the first and least painful of the duties which I had accepted. I found Lord Staines in his study, and, apparently, in a rather bad humour.

"Oh, how do you do, Maynard?" said he, looking up from the letter which he was writing. "Do you happen to know anything about that fellow Bracknell? When I was his age it used to be considered the civil thing just to let your father know when you proposed to leave his house or return to it; but nowadays the young men seem to think that they needn't take any notice of their fathers, except when they want money. Here is Bracknell gone off, nobody knows where, at the very moment when I am making business arrangements for which his signature is required. I told him about it two days ago; but, of course, my convenience counts for nothing when it is a question of going to some confounded steeplechase or other."

I thought there was nothing to be gained by putting off the evil moment. "I can't tell you where Lord Bracknell is, Lord Staines," I replied; "but I have come here to give you some very unpleasant news about him. He was married yesterday at the Registrar's office at Stokingham to Hilda Turner."

Lord Staines started up, overturning his chair. A rush of blood made his cheeks crimson for a moment, and then ebbed slowly away, leaving them of a chalky whiteness. For a full minute he uttered never a word; then he advanced slowly towards me from behind the table, trembling a good deal. "Maynard, my dear fellow," said he, quite quietly, "it is not possible that you can be telling the truth. Somebody has played a foolish hoax upon you."

And when I shook my head, "My good sir," he went on, with rather more impatience, "I tell you that the thing is impossible! You will allow me to know something about my own son, I suppose. Bracknell is what you please—I never called him perfect, God knows!—but at least he is a man of honour. You don't seem to take in that no honourable man could act in the way that you describe."

"It is not altogether unprecedented," I ventured to observe.

"I don't care whether it's unprecedented or not; Bracknell never did it. If he had been

determined to marry this—this lady, he would have defied me and done it in the light of day like a man, knowing very well what the consequences would be. But as for slinking off with her on the sly and betraying the confidence of his friend—pooh! don't tell me! If you brought the whole parish to swear to it, I wouldn't believe it."

I suppose he was really less incredulous than he professed to be, poor old fellow, for presently he added: "And pray, where did you get this precious piece of information from?"

And then I told him the whole story. It was one of the most unpleasant things that I have ever had to do in my life, and when I had said my say I wanted to go away and leave him; but he held me back, gripping my arm tightly. So far he had listened to me quietly enough, scarcely interrupting me, and only once or twice muttering under his breath a word or two which I could not catch, but now on a sudden his anger burst forth in a storm of disjointed, incoherent sentences.

"I'll never see his face again—never! You may tell him so from me. He has chosen to take his own way, and by the Lord he shall have it! Not another penny shall he have. I'll stop his allowance—a devilish handsome allowance too!—and his debts, which I have paid again and again, by George! without so much as grumbling—A fool and his money—but he'll find that I'm not quite

the fool he takes me for. Damn it all, sir! did you come up here with the idea that you were going to talk me over? You have got up this scheme among you—you and that girl and old Turner, a man who owes everything to me, and thinks he can play me such a trick with impunity. But I'll very soon let him see his mistake. He shall resign the living, as sure as I stand here!"

"I think you forget, Lord Staines," I interrupted, "that I, at least, can have had no conceivable object in furthering Hilda's schemes. If I had known anything about them, or had had any power over them, I should have done my best to put a stop to them for poor Jim Leigh's sake."

"Yes, yes—I know," he answered, with a complete change of tone. "I beg your pardon, Maynard; don't mind what I said about you; I didn't mean it. I mean what I say about Bracknell though—I'll never speak to him again. Oh, Harry, that boy has broken my heart! He knew it was essential that he should marry money—and then to ruin himself for the sake of such a girl as that! You needn't pity Jim Leigh; he's well rid of a bad bargain."

Very likely he was, but unfortunately there was no likelihood at all that he would take that view of the matter. I was beginning to say as much, but the words died away upon my lips; for at this moment the door was thrown open and Jim him-

self strode into the room. As soon as I saw his face I perceived that some one had been beforehand with me, and that there was no longer any occasion for me to consider in what words he might best be informed of Hilda's flight.

He glanced rapidly at each of us in turn. "It's true, then!" he exclaimed.

Lord Staines wheeled round upon him with an odd access of fury. "True!—yes, it's true enough. Why the devil shouldn't it be true? Did you make the mistake of supposing that my son was an honourable man? Why what a simpleton you must be! I—I——"

He stopped abruptly, stared at us for an instant with fixed, glazing eyes, and then, swaying forwards, would have fallen on his face if Jim had not caught him.

Between us we lifted him on to a sofa, and then the servants were called, and poor little Lady Mildred had to be sent for. I told her in as few words as possible what was the cause of her father's seizure, thinking it best that she should know the truth; and, so far as I could judge, she was not very greatly surprised. She kept her presence of mind admirably, displaying no agitation and doing what little could be done until the doctor came.

Later in the day a great London man was telegraphed for; but our local practitioner confided to me that he would not have considered this step

necessary in the case of a patient of less exalted rank.

"Will he die, then?" I asked.

"Well, no," answered the doctor; "not this time. But he will never be the same again. I have told Lady Mildred that she may exercise her own judgment about telegraphing to Lord Bracknell, but that in my opinion he should not be allowed to see his father."

Jim and I left the house together. We had hardly exchanged a word as yet, and I did not like to begin; so that we walked in silence as far as the park gates, where our paths diverged; and there he came to a halt.

"Good-bye, Harry," said he; "I'm going away to-morrow."

"The best thing you can do," I answered.

"Is it? I don't know. Anyhow, I can't stay here. I shall go to India, or Australia, or somewhere —it doesn't much matter. Harry, you are right: this world is peopled by a set of rascals and liars."

I said the world was bad enough, but that I had not brought quite so sweeping a charge as that against it.

"Oh, I thought you had. One thing I know: I will never trust man or woman again as long as I live. But it won't bear talking about, and, after all, what's the good of talking? Good-bye, Harry."

He turned and walked away a few paces, then

suddenly faced about and came back to me. "Some day or other we shall meet again, if I live," he said; "but when that will be I can't tell. Don't forget me, old chap; I'll write to you when I can."

And so we parted. I confess that I did not take his words quite literally, and fully expected that he would be over at our house on the following day. But I was disappointed. He left England, just as he had said that he would do; Elmhurst was shut up; its owner was lost sight of, if not absolutely forgotten, by his many friends, and it was years before I saw his honest, kindly face again.

CHAPTER VII.

THE hero of this narrative is, of course, Jim Leigh. It is true that Jim is not and never has been a particularly heroic personage; still, so far as writer and readers are concerned, he stands, for the time being, in that proud position, and must abide by the consequences of it. One of these is necessarily the occurrence of a considerable hiatus in the record of his career; for what is an unfortunate writer to do when his hero disappears into the interior of Abyssinia, or the least frequented provinces of India, and will give no account of himself for months together? If I only knew something of the circumstances under which, during all those years, Jim slaughtered lions and tigers and elephants and bears in the happy hunting-grounds of three continents, I should doubtless have many a thrilling adventure to chronicle; but I could never get anything but the most bald and meagre recital of his performances out of him; nor do I dare to draw upon my

imagination, for my own sporting experiences do not extend beyond the shooting of partridges and pheasants, and even those I am very apt to miss when flurried.

Unfortunately, too, Jim is one of the worst correspondents I have ever had to deal with. I did indeed receive letters from him with tolerable regularity; but for any information of interest that they contained, they might as well have been written upon the back of a post-card. "It is awfully hot here, but I have got accustomed to it and don't mind. Yesterday we were very lucky, killing two fine tigers; but our average so far has been hardly up to the mark. . . . . The top of Mount Everest is 29,000 feet above the sea, which seems a lot. I wonder why they never taught us modern geography when we were boys. . . . . I find that there is nothing like cold tea for quenching the thirst." And so forth, and so forth. That is scarcely the kind of thing that one wants to hear from a man who has quitted his native land in a state of bitter disenchantment and misanthropy, and who at the end of six years ought surely to be much better or much worse than when he started.

Jim never alluded to his misfortunes, nor made any inquiry as to the fate of those who had caused them. I generously gave him a few items of intelligence without having been asked; but he did not refer to them in his replies, and in like manner

he ignored my representations that owners of landed property ought not to be absentees for an indefinite period. Once or twice he spoke vaguely of coming home, but something always occurred to make him postpone his return, until, as I have said, he had been wandering about the world for no less than six consecutive years.

In the course of that time we who remained in England had all grown six years older; it may be that some of us had grown a little wiser, though I am not sure of it; and some had grown, if not famous, at least notorious. As for me, I had fulfilled my tutor's negative prediction and had not set the Thames on fire. Nevertheless, I had so far succeeded in my calling as to be always provided with a sufficiency of work, and remunerated by what I suppose I must call a sufficiency of pay. Also I had largely extended the circle of my acquaintance, and, during certain months of the year, went a good deal into society, where every now and then it was my great good fortune to meet with somebody who had never written a book nor even contributed to a magazine. I have always found such persons exceptionally clever and entertaining, but they are becoming more and more rare, and will soon, I fear, be extinct. The others —the majority, I mean, who have at one time or another put their ideas into print—are given to making conversation dreary for a poor man who gets his living out of literature, and who would

naturally rather talk about any other subject under the sun in play-hours.

Now it came to pass that one hot afternoon in the height of the London season I had returned to my chambers, physically and mentally exhausted, after an intellectual luncheon-party, and was saying to myself—with very great truth and justice—that of all forms of social cruelty luncheon-parties are the most wantonly malignant, when a loud rat-tat, as from a heavy stick, made me glance at the door, through which, after an instant of delay, there strode into my presence a tall, broad-shouldered, bronzed individual, who had Jim Leigh's eyes and nose, surmounting a black moustache and beard entirely unknown to me. The nose, however, was enough to swear by; and I don't know when in the course of my life I have been more delighted to behold a familiar and prominent feature. I welcomed him with a warmth which I hope was as agreeable to him as it was sincere on my part, and he smiled all over his face, quite like the Jim of old: so that I freely forgave him his beard.

"And now that you have come back at last, you mean to stay at home, like a respectable English country gentleman, I trust," said I, after I had made him comfortable with an arm-chair and a cigar, and something cold to drink.

"Well—I suppose so," he answered, with a shade of hesitation. "To tell you the truth, I'm utterly

sick and tired of foreign lands, and I should like nothing better than to settle down at Elmhurst for the rest of my days."

"What should prevent you from doing as you like? You can't mean that you haven't got over the trouble that drove you away yet?" said I, for I thought we had better come to the point at once.

"I believe I have got over it, I don't know for certain," he answered slowly. "Let us talk about something else. Tell me all about yourself."

So I told him all about myself, and his observations upon my literary achievements were flattering and discriminating, though I think he was a little bit nervous lest I should ask him whether he had read my works. Then he went on to speak of friends of former years.

"Poor old Lord Staines is still alive, I hear," he remarked.

"He is still alive," I replied, "and not likely to die, so far as I know; but you would hardly recognise him. On sunny mornings one meets him in a bath-chair in the park, with Lady Mildred walking beside him. He doesn't talk much nowadays, but he likes to see people, and he seems to be quite happy when he is allowed to have his little grandson with him. I told you that he was reconciled with the Bracknells long ago?"

Jim nodded. "And how do they get on?" he inquired, asking the question with something of an effort.

"Many people are curious to know," I answered. "That is, if you mean, how do they manage to pay their way? They are said to get on together rather indifferently. On the other hand, they have got on in society with a success which leaves nothing, or very little, to be desired. Lady Bracknell has climbed to the very top of the tree, and sits there in a graceful attitude to be gaped at by a multitude of admirers. She likes admiration, as you will remember, and takes some pains to obtain it. She is very accessible, too, in spite of her brilliant position, and if you will go and call upon her in Wilton Place I am sure she will be glad to see you, and will begin exercising her fascinations upon you without loss of time."

"Don't!" said Jim.

But I went on all the same. "You had better call upon her; I don't think she will fascinate you, my dear Jim. Her hair has changed colour; it is a lovely bronze now, but her complexion requires no aid from art. She dresses exquisitely; she is addicted to private theatricals; and once or twice in the season she makes her father-in-law give a ball, and receives his guests for him, so that Lady Mildred may be free to remain by his side, in case he should want anything. When he snubs her, as he does every now and again, she won't allow him to see little Lord Sunning for a day or two. That brings him to his bearings, and he has to go round to Wilton Place in his bath-chair and apologise."

"I don't want to hear about her," said Jim. He added presently: "I suppose you sometimes see Bracknell, don't you?"

I replied that I did. As a matter of fact, I had latterly been a good deal in Wilton Place, because I am credited with a certain facility for drilling amateur actors, and Lady Bracknell had found me useful in helping her to arrange the plays with which she was wont to entertain distinguished audiences from time to time.

"I wonder," said Jim, "whether he ever feels sorry for having treated me as he did. We used to be friends, you know, and—and I don't think he can quite have realised what an injury he was doing me."

That seemed likely enough; but I was unable to say that I had observed any signs of an awakened conscience in Bracknell. "I know exactly what will happen," I remarked. "You will be as great friends as ever by the end of the week; and before a fortnight is over he will have borrowed a sum of money from you which may probably be represented by four figures. What is the use of your trying to bear malice, Jim? You ought to have thrashed Bracknell six years ago. You could have thrashed him without any great difficulty; the process would have been consolatory to you and salutary to him. But instead of doing that, you chose to expend your wrath slowly upon unoffending lions and tigers, and the consequence is

that you haven't a spark of it left for home consumption. You are dying to shake hands with your enemy now—you know you are."

"I don't know that I am particularly anxious to shake hands with him," said Jim consideringly. "I would rather not think of him as a traitor, that's all. You see, it does make a difference if a man says he is sorry."

I was beginning to point out that expressions of sorrow must be taken for what they are worth, and that, although it may be right to pardon a man who has shamefully deceived you, it is extremely foolish to put faith in him again, when I was interrupted by the entrance of a second visitor, and who should this prove to be but Bracknell himself!

It was an odd coincidence that had brought him to my chambers on that afternoon of all others; for he had never so far honoured me before; but he had evidently not come with any idea of meeting Jim, whom he glanced at with an impatient frown and did not recognise. Jim was certainly altered, but Bracknell was perhaps even more so. He had lost his good looks to a great extent, and carried more superfluous flesh than he was entitled to at his age. His constitution was a fine one, but I believe he mixed his liquors in an appalling manner, and one can't sit up all night and every night, playing cards, without exhibiting traces of fatigue.

Jim stared at him in a sort of consternation; no doubt the change in his former friend was more apparent to him than it was to me. As he did not see fit to declare himself, the duty of making him known devolved upon me, and I watched with some interest the demeanour of the two men who were thus unexpectedly brought face to face once more. Jim got up slowly, looking very grave, and said, "How do you do, Bracknell?" But Bracknell burst into a laugh, and seized his old schoolfellow by the hand.

"Jim Leigh, as I'm a living sinner!" he exclaimed. "Dear old Jim! Where on earth have you been concealing yourself for the last hundred years? Didn't somebody tell me you were going in for big game in Central Africa or somewhere? I wish I had been with you! Let me know when you start off again, and I'll see if I can't get out of this for a few months. By Jove! what a relief it would be!"

It was so evident that he had completely forgotten the trifling circumstance of his having once robbed Jim of a wife that I was shaken by internal laughter, and had to turn away to conceal my emotion; but Jim, I dare say, saw nothing to laugh at in such callousness.

"I don't think I am likely to be making any more expeditions of the kind yet awhile," he answered coldly. "I have stayed away from England too long as it is."

"Have you?" said Bracknell, whose attention was already beginning to wander. "Well, I don't know; England's a beastly country to live in, unless one has about thirty thousand a year, clear. You don't mind my smoking, do you, Maynard?"

I said I did not; and he added, lowering his voice slightly, "I want just to have a word or two with you presently, if you're not busy."

Jim took this rather broad hint, and put on his hat. After I had ascertained his address, and had arranged a meeting with him for the following day, he turned to go; but Bracknell, starting out of a fit of abstraction, caught him suddenly by the elbow with renewed cordiality.

"Going to stay in London for a bit?" he asked. "You must look us up in Wilton Place, old chap. You know my wife?"

"I had the pleasure of being rather intimately acquainted with Lady Bracknell some years ago," replied Jim grimly.

"Oh, yes, of course. Well, she'll be very glad to see you again. Come and dine with us some evening. I expect we're pretty deeply engaged just now, but I'll drop you a line."

When Jim had departed, I could not help remarking, "It must be very convenient to have such a bad memory as yours."

Bracknell was apparently preoccupied. "Bad memory? How do you mean?" he asked. "Oh,

I see! But it would be more to the purpose to pity Leigh for having such a confoundedly good one, wouldn't it? He looked as sulky as a bear. I say, Maynard, will you do me a small favour?"

"That depends upon what it may be," I answered.

"Oh, it isn't much of a one. You know the editor of the *Piccadilly Gazette*, don't you? Well, just run your eye over this paragraph that he has put into his scurrilous paper."

He drew a newspaper from his pocket and pointed to the following oracular announcement:

"A certain noble earl is not quite so enfeebled in intelligence as is sometimes supposed. Not satisfied with knowing that his son is heir-presumptive to a vast estate, he is moving heaven and earth to get his daughter married to the present holder thereof; so that, in case of the advent of an heir-apparent upon the scene, the property may at least remain in the family. And yet the heir-presumptive is not happy, they say."

"I don't want Alf Beauchamp to read that sort of thing, you know," said Bracknell.

"I can well believe that you don't," I answered; "but how do you propose to prevent him from reading it, since it is already in print?"

"Oh, that's nothing. Very likely he won't see it; and if he does see it, the odds are that he won't understand. What I want is to stop this newspaper brute from speaking more plainly. You might be a good fellow and manage it for me. Tell him we'll invite him to dinner if he likes, and if that won't do, find out what will do. I suppose he has his price."

"Very likely he has," I answered, "and I am much flattered by your intrusting me with this delicate mission. But I am like the editor—I demand my *quid pro quo*, and if I do this for you, you will have to do something for me."

"With all the pleasure in life; but it isn't much that I can do for any man, except ask him to dinner."

"You can do a little more for Jim Leigh, whom I think you will admit that you have treated rather badly. First of all, you can beg his pardon. Is that too bitter a pill for you to swallow?"

"Oh, I'll beg his pardon, if it will make him any happier," answered Bracknell laughing.

"Secondly, you must promise that you will neither ask him to play cards with you, nor borrow money of him."

Bracknell opened his eyes. "Do you know, Maynard," said he, "that that is not very far removed from being an impertinent request?"

I replied that I might have said much the same thing of the request which he had addressed to

me. Anyhow, I must have his promise, or I should not go to the office of the *Piccadilly Gazette.*

So he laughed again and gave the required pledge, and went his way, leaving me somewhat reassured as to Jim's future. Lady Bracknell, I knew, would try to make him fall in love with her again; but I was not much afraid of her succeeding. Clever as she was, she was not quite clever enough to understand that the surest way of disgusting Jim would be to show him that she was no more true to the husband whom she had chosen than she had been in days gone by to himself.

CHAPTER VIII.

ONE morning not long after this, Jim did me the honour to breakfast with me, and gave me an account of his first interview with Lady Bracknell, which amused me very much and contrasted favourably in point of style with his epistolary efforts.

"I thought," said he, "that I had better call and get it over; so I went to Wilton Place about six o'clock in the afternoon, hoping that she would be in the Park and that I might leave my card and retire. But as she was at home, I had to march into the drawing-room, feeling a little shy and awkward, don't you know, as one does after spending such a long time out of reach of civilisation. I dare say I got rather red in the face, and I was horribly conscious that my boots squeaked. There were a lot of men in the room, young fellows with bouquets in their button-holes and very high collars—I hear you call them 'mashers' nowadays—and they all opened their eyes and mouths at

me, which was like their impudence. I confess that they made me uncomfortable at first; but after a bit I recollected that if I had ordered the eldest of them to run up to the Brocas for me eight or nine years ago he would have put his best leg foremost, and that set me more at my ease. Besides, I almost forgot them from the moment that Hilda began to talk to me. My dear Harry, what an extraordinary—what a miraculous change! You never prepared me for anything of the sort."

"I told you that her hair had become debased from gold to copper," I remarked. "If I didn't prepare you for any more startling change, it was because I must own that I can't detect any."

"Can't detect any! Do you mean to tell me that Lady Bracknell is the same woman as Hilda Turner? Oh, I know what you are grinning at; you think the change is in me, and that there never was really any such person as the Hilda whom I was in love with. Perhaps you are right; but for all that, she has transformed herself into something very unlike what she used to be. She doesn't look a day older, and speaking impartially—as I can now—I should say that she is prettier, if anything; but oh, dear! I didn't like her ways of going on at all. She is quite the modern great lady; she has all the fashionable slang at the tip of her tongue; and she said things which—which—well, I hate to hear ladies say

such things. And it struck me that the mashers were anything but respectful to her. As I listened to her, I wondered how I could ever have been such an idiot—but no matter! You said she wouldn't fascinate me, and most certainly she didn't. I am quite cured, Harry, and I suppose I ought to be very glad, but when one has nursed a complaint for years it makes one feel rather queer to lose it all of a sudden. The sensation is something like having a double tooth out. It's a good riddance, of course; but it seems to leave an enormous gap behind it. Well, those young swells took themselves off, one by one, until she and I were left alone, and then—do you know what she did then?"

"To be sure I do," I replied. "She drew her chair close up to yours, put her head a little on one side, gazed pensively at you, and presently gave you to understand that you were the only man whom she had ever loved with pure affection."

"Oh, no; she didn't go quite that length; though I must say—However, perhaps I ought not to tell you."

"I do not see the use of having a tried and trusted friend if he is not to be let into your confidence. I think you decidedly ought to tell me what she did," said I. For I wanted to know.

"Well," Jim continued, "she began by abusing Bracknell—said he was a drunkard and a spend-

thrift, and that he ill-treated her, and I don't know what all. Fancy a woman speaking about her husband like that!"

Evidently this was a new and distasteful experience to Jim. "Perhaps it was true, though," I suggested.

"If it was, she ought to have been the last person to say so," returned that hardhearted Jim. "But, between ourselves, I don't believe it was true. She has told me untruths before now, and why shouldn't she tell them again? I tried to stop her; but it wasn't a bit of good. She went on about her marriage having been a mistake, and about her having been drawn into it and having repented when it was too late, and so forth. Do you suppose she says that sort of thing to everybody?"

I replied that I really didn't know; but that probably she endeavoured to suit her conversation to her auditor.

"Her conversation didn't suit *me*, at all events," returned Jim emphatically. And then he told me how Bracknell had begged his pardon in a very frank and manly way for the wrong that he had done him six years before.

"I went to call at Portman Square the next day," he continued. "Poor old Lord Staines was always kind to me when I was a boy, and I think it amused him to hear all about my adventures. He wanted to know whether I had seen little

Sunning yet, and began to brag about the boy and his pluck and his beauty very much as he used to brag about Bracknell long ago. Poor old fellow! it was rather sad to hear him. He said, 'I hope you and Bracknell have made it up,' and when I told him that we had, he muttered, 'That's right—that's right. Old friends oughtn't to quarrel about a woman. Women aren't worth quarrelling about.' After which, he pushed his chair back and made a little bow to Lady Mildred. 'I don't mean you, my dear,' he said; 'you're worth your weight in gold, as everybody knows.' I remember your mother used always to be telling me that Lady Mildred was perfection, but somehow I never noticed in those days how pretty she was. I suppose I had only eyes for one person then. Ah, well! times are changed. I'd very much rather talk to Lady Mildred than to Lady Bracknell now. I had a long chat with her while her father dozed over the newspaper. It was pleasant to find that she hadn't forgotten me at all, though she said she would hardly have known me with my beard, which she didn't consider an improvement."

"Is that why you have shaved it off?" I inquired; for indeed Jim's long, thin face had been deprived of that ornament.

"Oh, well, one doesn't want to look more like a backwoodsman than one can help, you know," he answered. "As I was saying, Lady Mildred and I had a good talk and discussed you all and

enjoyed ourselves very much, until one of Lady Bracknell's mashers came in and interrupted us. A fellow called Beauchamp—do you know anything of him?"

"Alfred Beauchamp," I replied, "is a young man whom everybody knows something about, by reason of his being quite in the front rank of eligible bachelors. His rent-roll is said to exceed forty thousand a year; also he has coal-mines which, I believe, are expected to go on increasing in value. He is the only surviving son of the late Lady Staines's brother, and in the event of his dying without issue, the whole of his property would pass to Bracknell. As it would be dangerous to count upon his doing anything so obliging as that, the family have decided to marry him to Lady Mildred; only I imagine that they haven't ventured to tell him so, because, of course, he is his own master, and he might insist upon his right to choose a wife for himself. Did Lady Mildred receive him well?"

"I don't know what you call receiving him well," answered Jim, looking a little displeased. "She was civil to him; but I didn't stay long after he came in. I must say that he struck me as being rather a young fool and certainly not good enough for her. Do you suppose that she *wants* to marry him?"

"Lady Mildred is a dutiful daughter," I replied, "and Lord Staines is notoriously in embarrassed

circumstances. I can't say for certain what she may want, but I think I can form a pretty shrewd guess at what she will have to do. She is not so very much to be pitied, after all. There are very few girls in London who would refuse Alfred Beauchamp, I can tell you."

"Ah, you're just what you used to be!" exclaimed Jim impatiently. "Why should you always take such a delight in representing that everybody is selfish and sordid?"

I pointed out that I had made no such general arraignment, and that, so far as Lady Mildred was concerned, I had meant to imply that, if she married her cousin, she would probably do so from motives of filial and disinterested affection; but Jim did not seem disposed to listen to me.

"I dare say you know more about it than I do," he interrupted. "Anyhow, it's no business of mine."

I did not tell him that I had reason to doubt whether poor Lady Mildred would be happy with Beauchamp. My mother still maintained that the girl's heart had been given past recalling to Jim; but it would have been a pity to hint at such a state of things; because he was evidently a little smitten with her, and it was quite certain that she could not now accept him, whether he wore a beard or not. So I agreed with him that these projected marriages in high life did not concern humble individuals like ourselves, and

suggested, by way of changing the subject, that we should drive up to Lord's to see the Eton and Harrow match, as we had previously arranged to do.

Nothing is more futile and foolish than to say "Matters used to be better managed in old days." Such assertions are never believed, and are tolerably sure either to give offence or to provoke covert sneers. At the same time, I should think that there can be few admirers of the present so infatuated as to deny that Lord's on the Eton and Harrow match-day has suffered a change for the worse. It is no longer the pleasant meeting-place that it once was, it is frequented by a vast concourse of people who care neither for Eton, nor for Harrow, nor for cricket; and as for chancing unexpectedly upon an old schoolfellow, you have a far better chance of doing that in Pall Mall or St. James's Street than in the midst of such a rabble. Jim and I threaded our way, grumbling, through the deep fringe of spectators, whose persons and vehicles effectually prevented us from catching a glimpse of the game, and, having been provided with tickets by a member, were about to turn these to account when we were arrested by hearing our names called out in a high, clear voice which was familiar to both of us. From the open carriage in which she was sitting, surrounded, as usual, by fashionable youths, Lady Bracknell beckoned to us to approach, and we could not do

otherwise than obey her orders. Her ladyship was clad in Eton blue from the crown of her head to the sole of her foot, and very becoming the colour was to her. She attacked Jim at once.

"Come and talk to me," she said; "I have a thousand things to ask you. You don't want to look at that stupid cricket, do you?"

Jim, with a self-assertion for which I should not have given him credit, replied, "Well, I came here for that purpose." But probably the reluctance of the fly acts as an agreeable stimulus upon the spider.

"You shall go and look at it presently," Hilda said, and signed to him to get into the carriage beside her.

So I left them together and strolled on, feeling truly sorry for poor Jim, because I am sure that it must be a most unpleasant thing to be obliged to talk to a woman with whom you have once been madly in love and whom you love no longer.

I had not proceeded very far before I came upon the Staines party—old Lord Staines lying back in his carriage, propped up by cushions which kept slipping down and demanded careful watching on the part of Lady Mildred; little Lord Sunning, standing upon his grandfather's knee to get a better view of the game; and Alfred Beauchamp, leaning over the carriage door and blowing cigarette-smoke into his cousin's face.

I stopped to speak to them, and Lord Staines

said, "So your friend Leigh is back again at last, is he?—back at last, eh? Stupid fellow! if he had stayed at home, he'd have got over his disappointment sooner and thanked Heaven for it. I see more than that young woman fancies—more than she fancies by a long way."

The old gentleman had contracted a disquieting habit of thinking aloud. He went on muttering to himself now, and I dare say that if his remarks had been audible, they would have been found to be uncomplimentary to his daughter-in-law, whom he detested; but who, nevertheless, had reduced him to a state of tolerably complete subjection.

Lady Mildred looked a little nervous, I thought, and went on talking very fast to Beauchamp, a fair-complexioned young man, whose conversational powers were not brilliant, yet who was by no means such a fool as Jim had hastily assumed him to be. It struck me that he was bringing his mind to bear upon the thought that it might be a good thing if he were to marry his cousin and that he was succeeding very fairly well.

However, his attentions, if such they were, were soon interrupted. Little Sunning, who was rather a friend of mine, had clambered from his grandfather's knee on to my shoulder and had just dealt a resounding blow upon the top of my hat, by way of applause to a retiring batsman, when a vision of sky-blue flitted before my eyes, and a high-pitched voice (I forget whether I have

mentioned that Hilda's voice had a metallic ring which no efforts on her part availed to soften) said: "You are a nice sort of person to make appointments with, Mr. Beauchamp! May I ask whether you remember begging me to bring you here to-day? And are you aware that I kept the carriage waiting for you three quarters of an hour?"

And then I heard Beauchamp murmuring excuses from the background. "By Jove! Lady Bracknell, I'm so awfully sorry. What an idiot I am! Can't think how I came to forget it!"

There was an indistinct rejoinder, followed by a gradual dying away of both voices, from which I concluded that her ladyship had taken the young man by the ear and led him off. Having persuaded Sunning that he would be more comfortable, and that I should be cooler, if he got up on to the box, and having thus regained the power of turning my head round, I perceived that Jim had taken Beauchamp's place and was conversing with Lady Mildred, whose eyes had grown perceptibly brighter during the last few minutes. She certainly looked very pretty in her white dress, and I could not wonder at the satisfaction which Jim obviously derived from gazing at her, but it was unlucky, to say the least of it, that he should have taken such a long time to discover her beauty. Six years before, when Alfred Beauchamp had had a father and an elder brother

living, there might have been some hope for him; but his chance was now represented by a zero of a type so clear that one could only hope he might be enough of a reasonable being to see it. Reasonableness, however, was not his distinguishing characteristic.

Presently Bracknell made his way to the carriage and mounted the box beside his son. He took no notice of us, but hoisted the boy upon his knee, and they two became absorbed in contemplation of the game, the elder making occasional explanations to the younger which were listened to with interest and respect. I suppose paternal fondness must have been hereditary in the Henley family, for Bracknell was not one whit less foolishly devoted to his boy than his father had been to him in days of yore, and, to all appearance, was bent upon reproducing a system of treatment which had not been conspicuously successful in his own case. The child had Bracknell's dark hair and grey eyes. I could discern no resemblance to his mother in him, nor, in truth, did that strain of blood seem likely to infuse any fresh qualities of a valuable nature into the race.

While I was watching the representatives of three generations, Lady Bracknell and Beauchamp strolled by. The lady was talking with a good deal of animation, and the gentleman wore the air of one who is at once fascinated and puzzled. Bewilderment at the proceedings of Lady

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Bracknell was not, apparently, confined to him, for Lord Staines, following the pair with his eyes, muttered quite audibly:

"I do wonder what infernal mischief that woman is up to now! Is it only spite, or is it a plot? And if it's a plot, what the deuce is the object of it, you know?"

Bracknell looked down from the box and laughed. "Well, Maynard," said he, "why are you looking so solemn? Taking notes, as usual? It seems to me that you have all the elements of a sensational romance ready to your hand here. There are bound to be some strong situations before long, I should say, and you had better try to be on the spot when they come off!"

"And what is the *dénoûment* to be?" I made so bold as to inquire.

"Oh, don't ask me," he returned. "I don't know; and, between you and me, I doubt very much whether anybody else does either. All I can see is that there will be a row soon."

"What's that you say?" broke in Lord Staines querulously. "Why should there be a row? nonsense about a row! I wish to heaven, Bracknell, that you could induce your wife to let me manage my own affairs in my own way."

"I wish I could," returned Bracknell, with a shrug of his shoulders. "I wish I could induce her to let me manage *my* affairs in my own way. But I can't, you see."

CHAPTER IX.

If Lady Bracknell's motives for luring Beauchamp away from her sister-in-law's side were obscure to Lord Staines, they did not to a reflective person appear quite unfathomable. When only one life intervenes between your husband and a large property, it must, no doubt, seem deplorable that that life should be supplemented by others, and I can well believe that to see Beauchamp married would have gone to Hilda's heart, even though he should select as his wife a member of her husband's family. It is true that she can hardly have hoped to keep him permanently single, but she may have taken into consideration that existence is precarious, and that young men addicted to field sports run frequent risks of breaking their necks. Add to this she did not love Lord Staines, while she detested Lady Mildred with the intensity of an impostor who has been found out, and you have an explanation of her conduct which is at least plausible. I

don't say that it is the true explanation, because I cannot pretend to be able to follow all the tortuous workings of such a mind as Hilda's; but that the course which events subsequently took was premeditated and contrived by her in cold blood seems to me too violent an hypothesis. In any case, there could be no question as to the fact that she had marked Beauchamp down as her prey, nor did she fail to capture him. The truth is that she very rarely failed in enterprises of that kind. She had no remarkable personal advantages, yet the men whom she wished to adore her almost invariably ended by adoring her. Of the methods which she employed in order to achieve the desired end I have excellent reasons for being ignorant. I suppose that if by an impossibility she had ever thought it worth her while to captivate me, I should have succumbed like the others; but she never did think it worth her while, and therefore I have never ceased to wonder at the ease with which her victims were gained.

Beauchamp gave no trouble at all. He surrendered unconditionally at the first blow, and spent the remainder of the London season upon his knees, metaphorically speaking. I used to meet him and his enchantress pretty frequently at balls and crushes, and always watched them with interest. Other people watched them too, making such spiteful, ironical, or condemnatory comments upon the proceedings of the pair as

were prompted by their several dispositions and by the nature of the case: but by the persons who have been introduced into this history it so chanced that they were little remarked. Lady Mildred, who was in constant attendance upon her father, went very seldom into society; Bracknell had of late years ceased to frequent the circles which, as a bachelor, he had so conspicuously adorned; and those of Jim's friends who had not forgotten him during his long absence belonged for the most part to his own sex, and were not in the habit of giving balls. Thus Lady Bracknell was able to carry out her designs unmolested; and as Beauchamp continued to pay visits to Portman Square with unfailing regularity, any anxiety that Lord Staines may have felt on the day of the cricket-match was probably soon allayed.

Sunning, to be sure, very nearly let the cat out of the bag one afternoon when Jim and I called at his grandfather's house. We found him and the old gentleman with a tea-table between them, busily engaged in eating hot buttered toast. Lady Mildred was pouring out the tea, and Beauchamp, reclining in an arm-chair, looked very much as if he was wondering how soon he might venture to go away.

"I do think it is very dangerous," Lady Mildred was saying as we entered; and after she had shaken hands with us she appealed for support to Jim. "Mr. Leigh, do you think it is safe for

such a mite as Sunning to ride in the Row with nobody but a groom to look after him? And he always makes the groom ride a hundred yards behind."

"From what I have seen of the equestrian performances in the Row, I don't think it is an over and above safe place for anybody to ride in," answered Jim laughing.

"But seriously," persisted Lady Mildred, "I don't like to think of that child in the thick of such a crowd. He has one of those wicked little Shetland ponies, too, which might overpower him at any moment."

Sunning, with his mouth full of buttered toast, was understood to say that he would like to see the pony that could overpower him.

Lord Staines chuckled. "He can take care of himself—trust him! All the same, I think Bracknell might go out with the boy."

Sunning, having swallowed his toast, informed us that his father never rode in London. "And I mustn't ride with mother when *he's* there," he added, pointing a greasy forefinger at Beauchamp.

"Eh?—what?—who?" ejaculated Lord Staines, pricking up his ears.

And Sunning did not mend matters by continuing, in his lisping, childish treble, "Before he came there was another genkleman, but I think he's gone away now. Mother says not to ride with her when there's a genkleman."

"Would he be so very much in your way?" asked Lady Mildred, turning to Beauchamp, with just the faintest touch of disdain in her voice.

"Not the least in the world," answered the young man. "I am very sorry if I have prevented Lady Bracknell from taking him out, and next time—if there is a next time—I'll make a point of requesting the favour of his company. But really, I don't ride with Lady Bracknell very often."

"Evely day," said the relentless Sunning emphatically.

This was a little embarrassing, but Beauchamp, though young, was a man of experience, and his serenity was not easily disturbed. "You don't mean to say so!" he exclaimed. "I'm very much ashamed of myself, and I'll apologise to Lady Bracknell the next time I see her. But that is just the sort of stupid thing that I'm always doing. She good-naturedly asked me to ride with her one day, and I suppose I must have kept on going ever since from force of habit. I'll tie a knot in my pocket handkerchief at once, so that I may remember to forget to go to-morrow."

I don't know whether he was only anxious to stifle suspicion, or whether he still contemplated the possibility of an ultimate union with Lady Mildred; but he made great efforts to be agreeable to her during the next quarter of an hour, and when he took his leave Lord Staines, who had

evidently been alarmed for a moment, seemed to be quite reassured.

Jim, after we had left the house together, informed me casually that he considered the manners and customs of savages very superior upon the whole, to those of so-called civilised Christians, but declined to enter more fully into the subject, when invited to do so. "It doesn't matter; only that's my opinion," he said.

I am not acquainted with the customs of savages, except by hearsay; but our own, I freely admit, might be improved upon. One very tiresome custom, which, I fear, has become almost endemic among us of late, is that of entertaining long-suffering spectators with *tableaux vivants*. No one who has not been concerned in the getting up of one of these exhibitions can have any idea of the worry and trouble that they entail, though a good many people must be acquainted with the tedium of witnessing them when got up. Still, since they are the fashion, there is of course nothing for it but to submit to them; and Lady Bracknell, who, as I have already mentioned, was dramatically disposed, must needs have her *tableaux*, like everybody else. No part in them was assigned to me; because, as she informed me, with that laughing candour which, for some reason or other, plain people are supposed not to mind, I really was not good-looking enough; but I was allowed the privilege of assisting in the formation of the groups.

Beauchamp, it must be assumed, possessed the qualification which Nature had denied to me; for it was at once decided that he should have the honour of figuring in the only *tableau* of the evening which his hostess proposed to grace personally; that, namely, in which her ladyship, as Andromeda, with her beautiful bare arms chained above her head and her bronze hair rippling down over her shoulders, was rescued from destruction by a very Saxon-looking Perseus. I ventured to suggest that Bracknell might represent the monster, but this was considered to be a proposition of doubtful taste, and as no one else volunteered to undertake that ungrateful part, we had to have an appalling creature constructed out of inanimate materials for the occasion.

If only it had been permissible to make use of an inanimate Perseus into the bargain, I should have been spared much mental wear and tear and a grievous waste of time; for Beauchamp declared that he was physically incapable of standing on one leg for sixty consecutive seconds, and it was obvious that unless he stood upon one leg he would spoil the whole thing. I had to put him through a complete course of gymnastics, and even then it was only by the most diligent punching and kneading that I could force him into an attitude which was not positively grotesque. Whenever I left his side he, so to speak, tumbled to pieces instantly. However, in the long run we

achieved as near an approach to success as could be expected, and when the representation came off, this *tableau* was received with tremendous applause. I imagine that the majority of the spectators were lost in admiration of Andromeda's arms and shoulders and had no eyes for poor Perseus, who wobbled perceptibly.

Nevertheless, there were found persons to notice and remark upon Perseus too, if not exactly to admire him; and it chanced that, on the fall of the curtain, I was standing within earshot of one of these. She was an elderly lady, blessed with three marriageable daughters, and in that capacity naturally opposed to the goings on of unscrupulous young matrons, such as Lady Bracknell.

"It really is a little too bad," she said to her neighbour; "and I wonder that Lord Bracknell allows it. Of course we know that he is not over-particular, and, as far as that goes, I dare say his own manner of life doesn't give him the right to be so, but I should have thought that even he would have seen how outrageous this kind of thing is, considering that Mr. Beauchamp is as good as engaged to his sister. Under the circumstances, it's almost indecent."

I was having a little inward laugh at the "almost" in the above outburst of virtuous indignation when I became aware that some one besides myself had overheard it. Leaning against the wall behind me, was Bracknell, who had not

thought it necessary to be at home in time to receive his wife's guests, but had now come in—probably from his club. From the scowl upon his brow I concluded that he had been losing money; from the brightness of his eyes I feared that he had been drinking; and from the murderous glance which he shot at the dowager whose speech I have quoted I gathered that her unvarnished strictures were not agreeable to him. He muttered a word or two under his breath and turned away, leaving me in some doubt as to whether he was incensed against his wife or against her critic. But very shortly afterwards all uncertainty as to that point was removed from my mind.

I had been invited to remain for a quiet supper after the departure of the general company. Beauchamp and a few others who had been similarly favoured had already gone down to the dining-room, and I was lingering on the deserted stage with the fair Andromeda, when Bracknell suddenly entered and strode towards us. He either did not notice my presence or was indifferent to it.

"Hilda," he said, "you'll oblige me by dropping this; it has gone far enough. You think yourself very clever, no doubt; but it strikes me that you are in danger of being a little too clever, for once."

She turned slowly and surveyed him with calm

contempt. "Had you not better go to bed?" she asked. "Perhaps you may be in a state to explain yourself in the morning."

Bracknell had the family temper, and I thought for a moment that he was going to treat us to a display of it; but possibly he may have learnt by experience that storming at his wife was a thankless task. "I am sober enough now," he returned quietly, "to tell you that I don't choose to have Mildred's marriage put a stop to for your gratification. How long do you flatter yourself that that young fool is going to trot about after you, like a lap-dog? Till this time next year? And what do you suppose will happen when you begin to bore him? You do begin to bore people after a certain time, I can assure you."

"I dare say that is quite true," replied Hilda meekly; "you ought to know. Of course I will obey you to the best of my ability; but I am afraid I can no more force Mr. Beauchamp to marry your sister than I can prevent you from insulting me before a third person."

At this juncture the third person executed a strategic movement in the direction of the door. But Bracknell intercepted me.

"You needn't withdraw, Maynard," said he with a short laugh. "I've nothing more to say, and now we may as well go down and have some supper. I don't often interfere with her ladyship's

little games, but I believe she knows that when I do, she must give them up."

I observed, however, a slight smile upon her ladyship's lips which convinced me that, in this instance, she had no intention at all of giving up her little game.

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CHAPTER X.

FOR some little time after the evening of the *tableaux* I did not happen to meet the Bracknells, so that I could not judge from personal observation how far Hilda had obeyed her husband's commands and dropped Beauchamp, but divers rumours which reached me pointed to the conclusion that she had not dropped that foolish youth at all; nor indeed had I supposed for one moment that she intended doing so. It seemed probable enough that she had been able to convince Bracknell of the wisdom of a policy which she had not cared to expound in my presence, and if he had been brought to see that his sister's interests and his own were antagonistic, there could be very little doubt but that he would acquiesce in the sacrifice of his sister's interests with complete philosophy. Jim, who had returned to London after a flying visit to Elmhurst, amused me by an account of a remonstrance which he had felt it his duty to address to Lady

Bracknell and of the manner in which his intervention had been received.

"Lord Staines doesn't see it," he said confidentially, "but between ourselves, it's as certain as anything can be that she is doing her best to prevent Beauchamp from proposing to Lady Mildred."

I expressed much surprise, and congratulated Jim upon his insight into the crafty ways of feminine diplomacy; to which he replied modestly that he believed he was about as wide awake as most men nowadays. "One can't mix long in London society without having one's eyes opened," he explained; "and, as you know, I have good cause to distrust Hilda."

He paused, sighed, and then resumed; "I don't want other people to suffer through her as I have suffered. I thought she might perhaps be disposed to admit that she owed me some trifling favour, by way of reparation for the past; so I called upon her the other day and appealed to her to leave Beauchamp alone. It seemed to me that one admirer more or less could make very little difference to her, and I couldn't suppose that she had any deliberate intention of making Lady Mildred unhappy. At least, that's what I said to her."

"Are you so sure," I inquired, "that the loss of Beauchamp will make Lady Mildred unhappy?"

"Oh, yes, I'm afraid so—that is, I believe so," he answered. "From different things that she

has said to me, I feel pretty sure that she would accept him if he proposed to her; and after all, why shouldn't she? I don't myself think him particularly attractive, but he is a good-natured fellow and he isn't bad-looking, and—well, I suppose there would be nothing very extraordinary in any girl's falling in love with him. So, as I tell you, I made my appeal to Hilda; and I wish I hadn't, for it didn't succeed. She began by denying that she had led Beauchamp on, giving me to understand that he was infatuated about her and that she really couldn't help it. Then, when I persisted that she could put a stop to his infatuation very easily if she chose, she got angry and said that I, at any rate, ought not to object if Beauchamp proved faithless. I asked her what she meant—because really I didn't know—whereupon she calmly accused me in so many words of being in love with Lady Mildred myself!"

"How insolent!" I exclaimed. "And how palpably untrue and absurd!"

"Well, yes," Jim agreed, "I think it was rather insolent, and of course it was untrue. I don't know about the absurdity of it; but what does seem to me absurd is that friendship between a man and a woman should be considered impossible. Like a fool as I am, I said so to Lady Bracknell; and she immediately turned round upon me and asked why she wasn't to be allowed to make a friend of Beauchamp. That rather shut me up.

All I could say was that I didn't believe she cared two straws about Beauchamp's friendship; whereupon she retorted that she didn't believe in my disinterested friendship for Lady Mildred. So the dispute ended in a draw."

Lookers-on see most of the game, and when one is condemned to be a looker-on one must endeavour to be satisfied with that somewhat questionable advantage. There is, no doubt, a certain satisfaction and amusement to be derived from understanding your neighbour's state of mind better than he himself understands it, but this is apt to be neutralised by the consciousness of impotence with which lookers-on are commonly afflicted. If I had been a magician, I should have made everybody happy by transferring the bulk of Beauchamp's property to Bracknell for life, with remainder to his son. Being only a poor literary man of prudent instincts, I could do no more than strongly advise Jim to leave London and turn his attention to the management of his home farm. And perhaps it is hardly necessary to add that he neither took my advice nor thanked me for it.

It was about this time that I received a letter from home, informing me that "good Mr. Turner" was about to pay a visit to the metropolis; and closely following upon the heels of this announcement came good Mr. Turner himself to call upon me, it being very evident that he had been

commissioned to inspect and report upon my humble abode by my mother, who has an ineradicable conviction that, when absent from her, I never attempt to make myself comfortable. Mr. Turner, urbane and patronising as of old, dropped in whilst I was sitting over a late breakfast and was kind enough to join me in that repast. He remarked that they had given him nothing but eggs at his hotel, and eggs he was unable so much as to look at, owing to chronic derangement of the liver.

"I am staying at an hotel," he went on to say. "Dear Hilda thought it best that I should not go to her. She has reasons, you understand—good and sufficient reasons."

I said I was quite sure of that; and indeed the reasons in question did not strike me as being of a recondite character.

But Mr. Turner thought it necessary to give his version of them. "Bracknell," he continued, "is, I am persuaded, both kind-hearted and well-meaning and would not hurt my feelings for the world; but his habitual companions are—well, not precisely congenial to me, and he has contracted, from associating with them, a tendency to use words and expressions which, though possibly uttered in what I may almost call an innocent spirit, are such as I might find it my duty as a clergyman to protest against. Dear Hilda thinks —and I quite agree with her—that all risk of

unpleasantness should be avoided, and therefore she has kindly secured rooms for me in a very well-conducted hotel. I must remember, however, to tell them that eggs disagree with me."

Now. I knew very well that Bracknell might use language fit to make a bargee's hair stand on end before the Reverend Simeon would dare to uplift his voice in rebuke; but I said, with strict adherence to truth, that I had no doubt he would find himself more comfortable in his present quarters than in Wilton Place; and he presently remarked, sighing a little, that the only thing he regretted was being cut off from the society of his grandson.

"Had I been under the same roof with Sunning," he added, rather pathetically, "we could have amused ourselves together without getting into anybody's way; but I dare say they will let him come and see me when it can be managed."

Poor old Turner's adoration of his grandson was quite upon a level with that of Lord Staines, and the little fellow was fond of him too, although their natures were so unlike. I don't know why with advancing years we should become less tolerant of the infirmities of our elders, but I am afraid that with most of us it is so. Sunning was so sharp that he can hardly have failed to recognise an old donkey in his maternal grandpapa; but children—perhaps from having been such a short time in the world—love those who love them, and value kindness more than wisdom.

After Mr. Turner had conferred a few words of patronising encouragement upon me (he had a great disdain, tempered by benevolence, for dwellers in Grub Street), and after he had ambled away, with his umbrella under his arm, I began to feel very sorry for him in his loneliness, and it occurred to me that I should be doing an act of true Christian charity by giving him and the other grandfather a day's outing with their common descendant. And, being in such an amiable mood, I thought I might combine this good deed with the bestowal of a certain amount of harmless pleasure upon two other persons, as well as a fairly-earned holiday upon myself. So, having concocted my scheme, I imparted it to Jim in the course of the day, and he jumped at it with enthusiasm. We had already agreed to revisit Eton together some time before the close of the season; but to me belongs all the credit of the happy suggestion that Lord Staines, Lady Mildred, Sunning, and Mr. Turner should be added to our party. Jim represented that he was particularly anxious to carry out this plan because it would cheer up Lord Staines, who had been looking tired and worried of late; and of course that may have been his motive. But he disagreed with me quite sharply when I said that it would be kind to take the old gentleman off Lady Mildred's hands for a day and leave her to enjoy her liberty in London.

"She wouldn't enjoy it at all," he declared; "it

would be about the last thing in the world that she would be likely to enjoy. Besides, I don't believe old Staines would go without her. Now, I do hope you won't put forward that idea, Harry; because if you do, the whole thing is certain to fall through."

So I said that, in that case, I wouldn't put it forward; and as both Lady Mildred and her father received our proposition favourably, it only remained for us to beg leave of absence for Sunning and let Mr. Turner know of the treat that was in store for him. The Bracknells we did not ask; because, for one thing, they would certainly have declined, and also (which was, perhaps, more to the purpose) because we didn't want them.

We all went down from Paddington together in a saloon carriage, Lord Staines as brisk as a bee, Mr. Turner benignly complacent, Sunning dividing his attentions with strict impartiality between his two grandfathers, so as to avoid making either of them jealous, and Lady Mildred and Jim conversing quietly in a corner. And if anybody thinks that it was a cruel sort of kindness to throw the last-mentioned couple together, I can only say that the mischief was already done, and that, in my humble opinion, when an opportunity of securing a few hours' happiness, without injury to others, presents itself, it ought to be unhesitatingly seized; because such

opportunities are rather the exception than the rule in life.

We reached our destination pretty early in the afternoon; and since it was such beautiful, hot summer weather that no old gentleman could possibly be the worse for being taken out upon the river, we drove straight to the Brocas. There we hired a roomy craft, into which we packed our party. Lady Mildred undertook to steer; Lord Staines and Mr. Turner were made comfortable with cushions on either side of her; Sunning, after binding himself by a solemn promise not to jump about, was permitted to crawl into the bows, where he lay flat upon his stomach, as good as gold, the whole time; and Jim taking the stroke oar we pulled them all up to Surly.

I don't know what Jim may have thought about it; but I confess that to me the distance appeared to have enormously increased since the days of my boyhood. However, we took a good long rest, which some of us—two of us, I believe—employed in strolling away across the grass, while the others sat still and enjoyed the peace and quietness of it all, after the turmoil of London; and then in the cool of the evening we dropped leisurely down stream towards Eton once more. Lord Staines, a little excited by the influence of those once familiar scenes, became talkative, and was almost like his old self again. I could hear him repeating the names of the various landmarks to Sunning,

whom he had prevailed upon to sit beside him—names which already sounded a little strangely even to me, though my acquaintance with them was so much more recent than his.

"That's Athens, where you'll bathe when you're a big boy; and Upper Hope—but they won't let you go there till you've passed. The small boys are sent to Cuckoo Weir, where the water is apt to be muddy. Peasoup we used to call it. You must learn to take headers, my boy; I used to be pretty good at it. The great thing is to have confidence, and——"

"Did you ever take a header off there, grandpapa?" interrupted the boy, pointing up to the railway bridge ahead of us.

Lord Staines had to own that he had never accomplished quite so great a feat as that.

"But father has," Sunning said, in his eager, lisping voice, broken by little gasps. "He took a header off a bwidge—he told me so—and I don't know if it was that bwidge but it was as high as—as—oh, ever so high! And he did it for a bet—and he said it stung like *fun*—and he wouldn't do it again. But he won his bet."

"Did he?" said the old man, with a troubled look. "Ah, I dare say, I dare say. Don't you bet, my boy; it's a poor game. All that," he added, with a wave of his hand towards the Great Western viaduct, "is new. It has been put up lately—since I left."

I suppose he must have left somewhere about the year 1830. Very likely he had forgotten, until that casual mention of Bracknell's name occurred, that it was to his grandson, not to his son, that he was talking. After this, he was silent and abstracted for a time; but cheered up again when we dined together at the old "Christopher" and drank to the memory of former friends in the best champagne that that establishment could produce. Probably the memory of Lord Staines's school friends was cherished only by a very small band of survivors; but the old man ran over their names and their exploits, one by one, relating the merry life that he had led with them and the astounding breaches of discipline of which they had been guilty, until at length Mr. Turner, taking heart of grace, ventured to doubt whether the doings described would have been tolerated by any head-master worthy of his high and responsible post.

"My dear fellow," said Lord Staines, with superb contempt, "what do you know about it? Head-master indeed! But of course you don't understand Eton traditions. You were educated at Harrow, or some such place, weren't you?"

But Mr. Turner was flushed with wine, and did not choose to be sat upon. "Harrovians may be poor sort of creatures in your opinion, Lord Staines," he returned; "but at any rate we can generally show an eleven good enough to beat

yours at cricket.". Which was an extremely rude thing to say, besides being very false.

I don't know whether the harmony of the evening might not have been seriously interfered with by this unexpected onslaught of the lamb upon the lion, had not Jim jumped up, saying that if we were going to take a look round Eton we really ought not to lose any more time. Obviously, a single vehicle could not contain us all; so Jim and Lady Mildred walked on ahead, while the rest of us packed ourselves into a fly and were driven as far as the entrance of the school-yard. Here Lord Staines insisted upon getting out, and managed, with the help of my arm and his stick, to hobble for some distance across the flag-stones which have been worn smooth by the passing feet of so many generations. Mr. Turner and Sunning wandered away, it was getting late and close upon lock-up time, so that we had the place to ourselves.

The old man, who was leaning upon my arm, paused and looked about him a little wistfully. I could guess from my own sensations what his were likely to be. Everything was so strangely unaltered! There was the old clock-tower, looming high and dark in the twilight; there was the chapel, with the spaces between the buttresses where the lower boys used to play fives sometimes, and where the head-master used to take up his position to call "absence;" in the middle of the

quadrangle, encircled by his iron railing, stood the Pious Founder, with sceptre in one hand and orb in the other, silent and indifferent as of yore; but I and my contemporaries, who had once claimed a sort of property in all these things, had now neither part nor lot in them. We were clean swept away and forgotten, as in a very few years our successors would be also. One can't, at such moments, help feeling a certain tightness about the region of the heart and a sense of personal insignificance which may be salutary, but which is rather painful. But when Lord Staines spoke, it seemed that his thoughts had not been occupied with reminiscences of his own school days.

"I recollect," he said, "coming down here one Election Saturday. It was just before Bracknell left; and you and Leigh were leaving at the same time, you know. I walked back from Upper Club with Bracknell, and I remember that we stopped and talked for a moment just about the very spot where we are standing now. He told me he had backed my horse, Jupiter Tonans, by Thunderer, for the Leger, and I warned him that he had better hedge, because, as I dare say you are aware, Thunderers never stay; and sure enough, Jupiter Tonans finished third. I thought at the time that he would have stood a little more preparation—but no matter. Well, you know, Maynard, I suspect that what applies to horses

applies pretty much to ourselves. One hears a good deal about education and training, and example, and this, that, and the other; but when all's said and done, it's breeding that has the last word. Like father, like son. I have been reckless and extravagant all my life; he has followed in my footsteps; and the upshot of it is that we're both deuced nearly ruined now."

I said I was very sorry to hear it.

Lord Staines shook his head. "Bracknell ought to have married money. I always told him so. He chose to marry the parson's daughter, and it caused a coolness between us, as you will remember. I could have overlooked his imprudence and disobedience; but you see, I didn't think he had behaved well in the matter—no; I didn't think he had behaved well."

"It doesn't much signify now," I remarked.

"Not much now, perhaps; but it was hard upon poor Leigh at the time, and he felt it more than I should have expected. He was speaking to me about it not long since. He is a good fellow, that; I wish he had a little more money. I looked at him and Mildred this afternoon, and I thought to myself, 'I wish he had a little more money!' Only a fancy you know."

"I suppose he hasn't nearly enough money?" I hazarded.

"Oh, Lord bless your soul, no!" answered Lord Staines. "Nothing like it!—nothing like it!

No—she will have to marry Beauchamp; and, indeed, she might do worse. Come, Maynard, we'll go on and get into the carriage again; we haven't much more than time to catch the train."

So we moved slowly away to Weston's Yard, where the fly was waiting for us, and where the other members of our small party were already assembled. Jim climbed up on to the box, and we were driven away to the station, Sunning falling asleep before half the distance had been accomplished, and none of us talking much. It was natural that we should be a little tired and disinclined for conversation on the return journey. I myself, I believe, had a nap in the corner of the saloon-carriage; and even if I had been awake, I could not have scrutinised the countenances of my fellow-travellers in that dim light; but when we alighted in the full glare of Paddington Station, I could not help noticing how pale Jim was, and that Lady Mildred's eyes were suspiciously red.

Lord Staines shook hands with me on the platform. "Good-night, Maynard," he said, "good-night, and thank you for giving us all a very happy day."

Poor old fellow! I think it was the last happy day of his life. His life is over now, and I suppose one cannot say that it was a well-spent one; yet who knows the truth about any man's life? Perhaps, when all secrets are revealed, it may be found that some of those whose statues look down

upon us in public places, and whose names are recorded in history, have a less favourable account to show than this old nobleman, who was worldly, and a spendthrift, who was of little use to the community at large, who took no active part in politics, who excelled in nothing, except, to a limited extent, in the breeding of race-horses; but who never, to my knowledge, was guilty of an ungenerous or dishonourable action, and who, as it seemed to me, gave away more than he received both in the way of money and affection. He was by no means a show specimen of the order to which he belonged, but he possessed some of its good qualities. The coming democracy will doubtless be able to exhibit all these to the world, combined with others into the bargain; and in the meantime, I regret to say that I have more than once heard Lord Staines spoken of as a standing argument for the abolition of hereditary legislators.

CHAPTER XI.

I FELT tolerably sure that I should not have to wait long before receiving a visit and a full confession from Jim. I am accustomed to being utilised (if I may so express myself) as a sort of waste-paper basket or dustbin, into which my friends shoot the cares, anxieties, loves, fears and the like, which they cannot keep to themselves, but which they often hesitate to confide to those nearer and dearer to them. One is glad to be useful in any capacity, however humble, and I cannot disguise from myself that my great value lies in the patience and attention with which I listen to what is told to me. It is true that I am frequently asked for advice, and sometimes give it; but I cannot at this moment recall a single instance in which it has been acted upon; except, indeed, when it has chanced to coincide with the views of my confidant. The only advice that I could possibly offer to Jim must of necessity be so unpalatable that I determined not to bother him with it. If—as seemed almost certain—Lady

Mildred and he had avowed their mutual love down at Eton, the hopelessness of that love must be sufficiently obvious to both of them to stand in need of no emphasising from me; and I thought I might safely confine myself to expressions of sincere regret. When, however, Jim duly presented himself at my chambers, his avowal did not prove to be in all respects what I had anticipated.

"Harry, old fellow," he began, after he had cast himself down upon my sofa and had assumed a most woebegone air, "I've lost my self-respect."

"I shall be very pleased to assist you in looking about for it," I replied cheerfully, "and I dare say, between us, we shall manage to discover it again. It was mislaid, I presume, somewhere in Windsor or Eton on the afternoon or evening of the 20th instant?"

He nodded. "Well, yes; I suppose so. At any rate, I wasn't quite certain of the loss until then. Of course, with your sharp eyes, you saw long ago how matters were going with me; but I give you my honour that I didn't. Not that it would have made any difference if I had; for one can't help these things. If you had asked me, any time during the last six years, whether I could ever love another woman as I loved the one whom I was once so nearly marrying, I should have laughed at you. Yet that is what has happened to me; and I confess that it makes me feel a little uneasy and ashamed."

I could not see why a man who has remained faithful all his life to a woman who has deceived him and thrown him over should have any particular right to respect himself for being such a dolt, and I said so; but Jim observed that I didn't seem quite to catch his meaning.

"I owe nothing to Hilda," he said, "and it stands to reason that if one has been jilted, one is free. It isn't to her that I have been untrue; it's to myself. I'm too stupid to explain myself; but six years is a longish time, you know, and to find myself madly in love again, after having been quite positive for six years that that was the one sensation which I never could possibly experience a second time, is a little upsetting. It makes me feel that I am not the man I took myself for, and also that I have been a most stupendous fool."

"You have indeed, my dear fellow," I agreed, with ready sympathy.

"Yes, because, now that I look back upon it all, I am convinced that I never was really in love with Hilda. I thought I was, but it seems to have been a gigantic mistake from first to last; and what sort of opinion can one have of anybody who can make such mistakes as that?"

"Be comforted," I replied, "your case is not without numerous precedents, and so far as you have stated it, it seems to me to be one for plenary absolution. At the same time, if you are so very anxious to frame an indictment against yourself, I

think that might be managed without going so far afield. I don't blame you for falling in love with Lady Mildred, for that you couldn't help; but, since you must know as well as I do that you can't marry her, it might perhaps have been a little more considerate not to tell her that you loved her."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Jim; "you don't suppose I have told her, do you? Why, I never knew it myself until the other day, down at Eton, when the truth flashed upon me all of a sudden. It may seem very ridiculous to you; but I assure you that up to that moment I had been under the impression that I only cared for her as a friend. And it is only as a friend that she thinks of me."

"Really?" said I, somewhat staggered by this announcement. "Then—excuse my curiosity; but what made her eyes so red after you and she had been talking together?"

"Her eyes were red because she had been crying," answered Jim curtly.

He looked so savage that I did not like to press him with further inquiries; but he resumed by and by of his own accord: "She had been telling me about her family affairs, and a nice mess they seem to have got into! There is no inducing Lord Staines to economise. He has left off racing; but I believe that is the only expense that he has put down; and of course he has to support the Bracknells. In point of fact, I didn't come here to speak to you about myself and Lady Mildred,

because that it is a perfectly hopeless business and neither you nor anybody else can help me; but I'm troubled in my mind about Bracknell. He has been very kind and pleasant to me since I have been back; but I know he is in a sea of difficulties and——"

"I expected this," I interrupted, in some vexation. "So much for his promise! Of course he has been borrowing money of you, and he is just about as likely to repay you as if he were a South American Republic. You may as well make up your mind that you will never see *that* money again."

"Do let a man finish his sentence," remonstrated Jim. "In the first place, he hasn't borrowed a shilling of me, and in the second, it wouldn't distress me in the least if he had borrowed a thousand pounds. But do you know, Harry, sometimes I am half afraid that Bracknell is a scoundrel."

He said this so hesitatingly and with such a look of anxious deprecation on his honest face that I had not the heart to tell him how extremely probable it was that his apprehensions were well founded, although I could not go so far as to meet him with the contradiction which he evidently hoped for. So I only begged him to be more explicit.

"I suppose you know," he said, "that Bracknell has been several times upon the brink of a smash,

and that his father has paid his debts over and over again? Lord Staines is the kind of man who would cheerfully give away ninety-nine pounds if he had only a hundred left in the world, and he seems to have gone on meeting these periodical demands without a murmur, until one fine day he discovered that he couldn't raise another five-pound note by hook or by crook. Then he took to his bed and said he was going to die. Bracknell wanted a lot of money—how much it was Lady Mildred doesn't know, but she thinks it was a very large sum—to save him from immediate bankruptcy; and the poor old man was so cut up about it that he almost went off his head. He declared that he was the only person to blame; that he had squandered money which ought to have been saved for his son; that he had brought Bracknell up to be extravagant and was bound to see him through, and so forth; and when he was in the midst of his despair, as luck would have it, Alfred Beauchamp came in to see him. I suppose," added Jim, with a touch of reluctance, "that Beauchamp must be a good fellow. Anyhow, he insisted upon lending his uncle the money; and so——"

"And so Lord Staines rose from his bed and promptly forgot all about the matter?" I suggested, as Jim came to a halt.

"No; not exactly that. He told Beauchamp frankly that he didn't think there was much

prospect of his ever being able to discharge his debt, but that—that, in short, he wouldn't so much mind owing the money to his son-in-law as to his nephew. Do you see?"

I could not help laughing at this amazing method of cancelling a liability, which assuredly would never have entered into the head of any human being but Lord Staines. "I can't say that I do see," I replied. "Fathers don't, as a rule, expect to be handsomely paid for allowing their daughters to be taken off their hands; on the contrary, it is they who are expected to make settlements upon their daughters."

"Yes, but the husband makes settlements too; and it appears that Beauchamp was to deduct this sum from the amount that he would otherwise have settled upon Lady Mildred. Most likely the fact of the matter was that he was overflowing with money, and that he was a good-natured sort of chap, and that he was glad to hold out a helping hand to his uncle. Whether he was really anxious to marry his cousin at that time or not I can't make out; perhaps it was only to pacify the old man that he said he was. But he certainly wasn't in any hurry to change his condition. He begged Lord Staines not to mention the subject for another year, because he had made arrangements to go off to Newfoundland and Canada for salmon-fishing and couldn't tell how long he might be away, so Lady Mildred never heard a word about

it until a few weeks ago, although of course she suspected that it was Beauchamp who had got her father out of his difficulties, and she couldn't help knowing that her people wanted her to marry the man. When she met him again in the beginning of the season he paid her a great deal of attention, and everything seemed to be going smoothly until Lady Bracknell, for reasons best known to herself, took it into her head to put a stop to the affair. You must have seen how easy she has found it to do that. Everybody has seen it, except Lord Staines, who was frightened at first, but was quite reassured after Bracknell had promised to make his wife drop Beauchamp."

"Bracknell knows about this curious money transaction, then?" I asked.

"He knows now. His father thought it best to tell him when Hilda's game became evident; and that is what makes me afraid that he isn't as straight as he ought to be. Because Lady Bracknell hasn't dropped the man; and when you come to think of it, it is clearly to Bracknell's interest that Beauchamp should remain single."

That was undeniable, but what interested me more than Bracknell's probable bad faith was the singular attitude assumed by Jim, who seemed to be not only prepared but anxious to give up the girl of his heart to Beauchamp. I ventured to express a little of the surprise that I felt—which had the unexpected effect of making him very

angry. What, he wanted to know, did I take him for? And as I made no reply, being unable to hit upon one which should be at the same time truthful and flattering, he went on to explain that true love (a sentiment of which I was evidently ignorant) is in its nature disinterested; that the true lover desires the happiness of the beloved object, not his own; and further that, after what had passed between Lord Staines and Beauchamp, Lady Mildred's marriage with the latter was the only conceivable means of averting disgrace from her family.

"As to the nature of true love," I answered, "I will bow at once to your superior knowledge, although my own limited opportunities of judging would have led me to think otherwise. But with regard to these subtleties about the disgrace which threatens the house of Henley I confess that I can neither follow you nor agree with you. Beauchamp, it seems, has lent money to Lord Staines, and if you say that Lord Staines or his successor is bound in honour to refund the money eventually and to pay interest upon it in the meantime, I am quite with you. But when you assert that honour can only be satisfied by Lady Mildred's marrying, against her will, a man who doesn't want to marry her, you really do get a little beyond my depth."

"Who told you that it would be against her will?" asked Jim.

"My dear Jim," I returned, with excusable impatience, "am I an absolute idiot?"

He did not reply in the negative with that promptitude which I should have expected.

"N—no," he said hesitatingly, after a pause, "but you may be mistaken. So, of course, may I; only I don't think I am. You see, I couldn't ask her point-blank whether she loved the man, could I? All I know is that she had made up her mind to marry him if he asked her, that she thinks it her duty to marry him, and that she is awfully distressed about Bracknell's behaviour. I haven't such a bad opinion of Bracknell as you have. My belief is that, if matters were put plainly before him, he would see what a dirty business this is and would refuse to have anything more to do with it. And I've a great mind to look him up and tell him what I think."

I endeavoured to dissuade my friend from taking this uncalled-for step; I represented to him, in the prettiest language at my command, that he would do far better to mind his own business, and that if he insisted upon meddling with what did not concern him, he would only get rapped over the knuckles for his pains; but, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, very few people are wise enough to act upon my advice. Jim assured me that he did not in the least mind being rapped over the knuckles, that he intended to do what he was pleased to call "the straight thing," without

regard to personal consequences, and that, for the rest, he was far too unhappy already to be made either more or less so by Bracknell's displeasure.

So I let him go, without attempting to comfort him about Lady Mildred, or telling him what was my own belief with regard to her affections. It would not, I imagine, have made him any happier to know that she was in all probability as unhappy as he, and the prospect of this love-affair reaching a successful issue was so very slight that it seemed best to let it die of inanition, as all love-affairs will, if only sufficient time be allowed them.

CHAPTER XII.

NOT long after Jim had left me, I walked down to the club to glance through the evening papers, *sicut meus est mos*, and finding my favourite arm-chair by the window vacant, I settled myself comfortably in it and took up the *St. James's Gazette*. The political article did not look very interesting; so I skipped it and went on to the next, which was printed in smaller type, and was headed "Infants in the Saddle."

"A much-needed warning to parents," it began, "will, we may hope, be conveyed by the sad accident to Lord Bracknell's child which we report elsewhere. The wonder is that such accidents are not of more frequent occurrence."

I read no farther, but hurriedly turned over the leaves of the paper until I came upon the following paragraph—

"ACCIDENT IN ROTTEN ROW.—Lord Sunning, the only child of Lord Bracknell, and grandson of the Earl of Staines, was riding in Rotten Row this

morning, attended by a groom, when his pony suddenly became unmanageable and bolted. The animal galloped for a considerable distance, then swerved and fell, throwing its rider with great violence against the iron railings. Lord Sunning, who was rendered insensible by the fall, was at once removed to his father's residence in Wilton Place, where we regret to say that he lies in a precarious condition, having, it is feared, sustained incurable injuries."

I ordered a hansom and started at once for Wilton Place, hoping against hope that the newspaper report might turn out to be an exaggeration. There are calamities against which the reason seems to revolt. "Such a thing cannot be true," one is often inclined to say to oneself; "what would be the good of it?" My dear mother maintains that these trials are sent to us to test our faith, and it is not for me to dispute the truth of her assertion; yet I could not help feeling that if poor little Sunning was to be cut off in the bright morning of his life for such a purpose, the sacrifice would probably be made in vain. Of all those who loved him there was not one who was likely to lay that lesson to heart, unless indeed it might be old Daddy Turner, who, I suppose, held religious convictions of a kind. Then I remembered what splendid constitutions all the Henleys had, and that Bracknell, as a boy, was for ever tumbling about and escaping scot-free from acci-

dents which would have killed anybody else; so that by the time that I had reached my destination, I had almost persuaded myself that this would prove to be a case of concussion of the brain which would leave no permanent mischief behind it.

But before the butler who opened the door for me had spoken a word, I knew that there was no hope. In a few moments I had heard all about it. The great doctors had been and had gone away again, saying that nothing could be done. Sentence of death had been pronounced, and the boy would hardly live until morning. He was conscious now, and had no pain, the butler said. "Perhaps his lordship would see you, sir," he added, in a low voice; "he's bearing up wonderful."

I entered the hall, where several servants were standing about, and one of them went to tell Bracknell that I was there. At the foot of the staircase sat a man in groom's dress, bending forward, with his elbows on his knees, and a look of such blank despair upon his face that I could not refrain from making an effort to comfort him, "It wasn't your fault, you know, James," I said—stupidly enough.

The man lifted his heavy eyes for a moment. "His lordship spoke terrible 'ard to me, sir," he said.

I could well believe it. Men like Bracknell are apt to be cruel and unjust in their grief, and to

attack the first person who chances to cross their path; but to them, in their turn, it is an injustice to remember words spoken at such times. I was endeavouring to say as much to the unfortunate James, who, however, did not appear to hear me, when Bracknell came down the stairs, with a slow, steady step. Except that his usually florid complexion had become perfectly colourless, he showed no traces of emotion. He waited until he was close beside me, and then said, quite quietly, "Sunning has broken his back, Maynard."

All of a sudden the groom burst out crying. I don't know anything more painful and pathetic to witness than the unrestrained weeping of those who belong to what we call the lower orders. It is all very well to say that they feel less deeply than we who have been schooled to control ourselves; but sometimes I doubt whether they really do feel less deeply, and whether, after all, we have much right to consider ourselves superior to them because, as we assume, our sorrow outlasts theirs. For in truth all sorrow is short-lived enough.

Bracknell glanced at the man, knitting his brows. "James," he said, "I believe I blamed you just now. I was wrong; you were not to blame. I beg your pardon, James."

He spoke in a hard, level voice. He had made a mistake and apologised for it; but he was not, apparently, moved. Presently he turned away, taking me by the arm and saying, "Come up

stairs and see the boy. There is no more suffering now; but he is dying, all the same. Won't last through the night, they say."

I followed him up the stairs and across the landing, wondering a little at his calmness. But with his hand upon the lock of a door, from the other side of which came an audible murmur of voices, he faced about abruptly, his eyes blazing and his white face set.

"Damn that woman!" he exclaimed. "She promised me that the boy should never ride alone again, and she has killed him rather than have one of her cursed flirtations interrupted."

I caught him by the arm to stop him, for his voice rang through the silent house; but he guessed what I was afraid of, and broke into an odd, savage sort of a laugh. "Oh, don't distress yourself," he said; "it's all one to her —*she* doesn't care!"

Then we went into Sunning's room.

The poor little man was lying flat on his back where they had laid him. His cheeks were as white as marble, and his features were pinched and sharp, but of all the crowd of faces which I saw confusedly as I entered, his was the most cheerful. Lady Bracknell was sitting by the window, pressing her handkerchief to her lips. She looked frightened, I thought. Beside her stood Jim, who, I suppose, had come to the house upon the errand that we know of, and

had been admitted. Lady Mildred was there too, and Sunning's old nurse, and Lord Staines, and Mr. Turner; but none of them spoke to me, nor did I venture to do more than glance at them.

Sunning had his dog, a little blue Skye, on the bed beside him. He held out his left hand to me, for his right arm was crushed and powerless, and smiled. We had been friends —more so than I have had any occasion to mention in the course of this narrative—and I think he was glad to see me. He wished me to have the dog, he said; and I was to take him away with me, please, because he wouldn't lie still much longer, "and he hasn't had his walk to-day." He had a few last words to say to me, but they were only a few; for his strength was evidently ebbing fast, and I could see that his childish brain was preoccupied. His eyes kept wandering from one member of the group to another, but always rested longest upon his father, whose broad shoulders were turned towards us, and whose elbow I touched at last, feeling sure that the boy wanted to speak to him.

Bracknell wheeled round hastily, and dropped on his knees beside the bed. "Yes, my boy," he said; "what is it?"

"Father," whispered Sunning, "you won't have Sheila shot, will you? I don't want Sheila to be shot."

His eyes grew very large and piteous, and there was a quiver about the corners of his mouth. No doubt he had had some experience of his father's passionate nature and feared that, in a fit of unreasoning fury, he might take vengeance upon the irresponsible cause of his son's death.

But Bracknell answered gruffly, "No, my boy; nobody shall harm her. I'll swear that."

Sunning gave a little sigh of relief, looked curiously at his father for a moment, and then turned his head towards Lord Staines, who was sitting motionless on the other side of the bed, in what seemed like a state of nerveless stupor. "Never mind, gran," he said; "it doesn't hurt." And then, "You're so awfully old, too, gran—you'll come soon."

Lord Staines made no answer, but Mr. Turner rose and approached, wiping the tears away from his foolish old eyes with a large silk pocket-handkerchief. "We shall go to you; but you will not come back to us, Sunning," he began. I don't care to quote the rest of his remarks. He was a cleric of the old-fashioned school, who had not, I should imagine, occupied himself much with the subject of eschatology. It was, perhaps, right that he should give utterance to his views, which, I am sure, were at any rate sincere; but those stereotyped phrases about the New Jerusalem and white-winged angels and

golden harps, enunciated with a certain pomposity, despite the occasional quavering of the speaker's voice, jarred somewhat upon my ears, as I dare say they did upon those of several other persons present. Sunning listened patiently. Thank God, he had not many sins, even of a childish kind, to reproach himself with. He had always been a good boy, as well as a brave one, and had no need to dread the unknown future, be that what it may.

After a time, he beckoned to me and put the dog into my arms. "Good-bye, Bluey," he whispered. The dog licked his face and he patted its rough head, and then for the first time two great tears welled up into his eyes and brimmed over.

I bent over him and kissed him, and then I picked up the dog and went away. I had no right to intrude upon the scene which I could see was close at hand; and besides, to tell the truth, I couldn't bear it any longer. Many sadder things than a child's death are happening in the world every hour. One may look back upon it dispassionately now and say that it was perhaps well that our poor little Sunning should have been taken from us—that if he had lived, he might not have been happy; that he would almost certainly have been badly brought up; that he would have succeeded to a diminished property; that he

would very likely have followed in the steps of his father and grandfather, with less means at his disposal, and consequently greater temptations than theirs, and so forth; but the fact remains that he was the brightest and most promising child I have ever known, and that, humanly speaking, his life was cut short because his mother did not choose to take the trouble of looking after him.

CHAPTER XIII.

EVERYBODY expected that the loss of his grandson would be poor old Lord Staines's death blow. He himself was of that opinion and at first refused to leave his bed, saying that he had now nothing to live for. But perhaps, upon further thought, he may have remembered that he had still certain matters to attend to before quitting a troublesome world, or perhaps he may have been too old and worn out to die of grief. At any rate, he did not die, nor did his health appear to suffer, although I believe he was never seen to smile again after Sunning's little coffin was laid in the family vault at Staines Court.

Lady Bracknell did not appear at the funeral. It was believed—or at all events it was stated—that she felt unable to face so cruel an ordeal; but the truth, as I afterwards heard upon excellent authority, was that she was afraid to venture within reach of her husband, who had ordered her away from him immediately after the boy's death,

assuring her that he was not master of himself and that she would do well to keep out of his sight for some time to come. So she took him at his word and fled down to the country, to the house of I forget what friend, who undertook to comfort her in her affliction. Bracknell remained in London, and, as I was told, continued to go to his club every day, to gamble heavily and to drink hard.

The uses of adversity are doubtless sweet to some people; but there are others to whom adversity is neither sweet nor useful, and Bracknell belonged to the latter category. His was essentially a fighting nature, and so long as he had anybody or anything to fight against, his blood was likely to be kept in a tolerably healthy state; but he was not a man who could be benefited by defeat or disaster. Passionate, headstrong, and spoilt by the continuous prosperity of his youth, he resented the various misfortunes of his more mature years as so many affronts directed at him by Heaven, and when his crowning calamity descended upon him, avenged himself by going over to the devil. I don't mean to say that he put the case before himself in those terms; but I believe they express pretty accurately what his feeling was. I called upon him several times, but he was always out; and one day when I chanced upon him in the street, he told me roughly that I need not trouble to look him up again.

"Kindly meant, I've no doubt," he said; "but I

should be very much obliged to my friends if they wouldn't be so—&c., &c.—officious. When I want to be condoled with I'll let them know."

After that I could only leave him to himself. Even if he had been willing to listen to me, I should have been puzzled to discover any plausible form of consolation; and certainly I should not have hit upon that selected by my mother, who, in the overflowing kindness of her heart, wrote him a long letter, in which she reminded him that, among other blessings, he still possessed his wife. I believe she was afterwards a little ashamed of having taken this bold step, and would never have let me know of it, had she been able to resist showing me Bracknell's reply, which was brief and pithy:—

"DEAR MRS. MAYNARD,—I told your son the other day that I didn't want to be condoled with; and I don't. But I must say that I hardly expected to be congratulated. Lady Bracknell is not with me just now, or she would, I am sure desire me to thank you for speaking of her as a blessing. It is probably the first time in her life that she has been called by that name, and I should think it would be the last.

"Sincerely yours,

"BRACKNELL."

My mother shook her head at this. "He ought not to speak so of his wife," she said. And

when I brought forward certain excuses on Bracknell's behalf (I would not shock her by mentioning all those that might have been mentioned, nor would she have believed in them if I had) she only shook her head the more, telling me that I had no realising sense of the sacredness of marriage.

Whether I deserved that rebuke or not is of small consequence; but I might fairly have retorted that my dear mother, for her part, was a little too sublimely indifferent to the worldly side of that contract, and that by her present conduct she was in danger, not only of making two people more unhappy than there was any occasion for, but of getting herself into serious trouble as well. However, I doubt whether anything that I could have said would have prevented her from asking Lady Mildred to come in to tea every other day, and then casually getting Jim to meet her. She had made up her mind that this couple ought to be married, and even that it was the will of Heaven that they should be married. It would have been too much to expect that the will of Heaven should be set aside to please Lord Staines or Mr. Beauchamp; the latter of whom, as my mother pointed out, might have proposed long ago, if he had chosen, but had preferred to go off to Norway and catch salmon.

And so, during that summer, our house was made the scene of what, to a common-place person like myself, wore very much the appearance of

clandestine love-making. I don't know what Jim and Lady Mildred talked about while they wandered up and down our lawn together. They did not honour me with their confidence; and indeed I was sorry to observe a decided inclination on their part, as well as on that of my mother, to send me to Coventry. Did they think, I wonder, that I should betray them to Lord Staines? They ought to have known me better; but I am more or less accustomed to being misjudged by those who ought to know me better; and I may add that I have never been deterred by that circumstance from doing to them as I would be done by.

That this is no vain boast will be seen from the tone which I took up when Lord Staines's suspicions were at length aroused, and when he sent for me to pour them into my ear. It was on a fine autumn day that, in obedience to his summons, I walked up to Staines Court and was shown into the library, where he now sat from morning to night, and where, in spite of the warmth of the weather, a fire was burning. He looked very feeble and broken, bending forward in his chair and holding up a thin, trembling hand to the blaze.

"Maynard," he said, "I want you, like a good fellow, to speak a word of warning to your friend Leigh. I would rather not speak myself, because, as you know, he has been caused trouble and

disappointment by our family already, and I should be sorry to seem unfriendly to him. So will you just tell him as kindly as you can that it won't do? I see more than perhaps you young folks suppose, and of course you know what I allude to. It won't do, my dear Maynard. I am sorry for it; but it won't do."

"Lord Staines," I answered boldly, "I am not going to undertake any such commission. I can quite understand your anxiety to keep the Beauchamp property in the family, and if you can get the persons principally concerned to do as you wish, I dare say it will be in some respects a good thing; but I don't choose to be a party to any scheme of that kind. My point of view is not the same as yours. What may become of the Beauchamp property is nothing to me; whereas it is a good deal to me that Jim Leigh should have what he wishes for. I believe that Lady Mildred and he are attached to each other, and, that being so, I hope they will stand up for themselves and marry."

I fully expected that this audacious harangue would call forth an explosion of wrath; but my expectations were not fulfilled. Lord Staines only sighed wearily and said: "God knows I care little enough for money or lands now! My time is almost up, and I suppose Bracknell will be the last of our name. Against Leigh I haven't a word to say; only as I told you before, it won't do.

Mildred must marry Beauchamp. I am under obligations to him which can't be discharged in any other way; and he will be a kind husband to her. We won't argue the point, if you please."

"He will not be a husband of her choosing," I made so bold as to observe, despite this prohibition.

"You don't know what you are talking about," returned the old man fretfully. "The thing must be, and there's no use in discussing it. If you don't see your way to speaking to your friend, I must speak to Mildred, that's all."

I said nothing about this conversation to those whom it concerned, and whether Lord Staines carried out his intention of remonstrating with Lady Mildred or not I cannot tell. Very likely he did not, for I fancy that he shrank from distressing her, and he may have thought it needless to take active steps before Beauchamp's return from Norway.

No news with regard to that event reached my ears, and it was not until late in the autumn that I was made aware of its having taken place, by encountering Beauchamp himself at a country house in the north of England, where I had been invited to spend a few days. It struck me that our meeting was not a source of unalloyed satisfaction to him. There was even a sort of shamefacedness in his demeanour which I could not at first account for, but which explained itself at

dinner-time, when Lord and Lady Bracknell made their appearance among several other guests who had arrived late in the afternoon, and when her ladyship exchanged meaning glances with my young friend, after affording him a conventionally polite greeting.

The Bracknell *ménage*, which for a time had been threatened with disruption, had been set agoing once more (by the kindly intervention of friends, as I was informed), and was, to all appearance, being conducted upon much the same principles as heretofore. At all events, Bracknell seemed to look with absolute indifference upon the renewal of the flirtation which he had once professed himself determined to check. The past few months had worked a very perceptible change in him; he had grown stouter; his complexion had become pasty and his eyelids heavy, and a few grey hairs had appeared about his temples. His manners, too, had distinctly deteriorated. He was bored, and did not attempt to disguise the fact; moreover, he displayed a contradictious and quarrelsome tendency which evidently caused some anxiety to our hostess.

As for Lady Bracknell, she was brilliant and radiant. Her black dress and jet ornaments threw up the dazzling whiteness of her skin; she looked as if she had not a care in the world; and if, as I suspect, the other ladies were whispering to each other what a heartless wretch the woman was, I

can only say that in my humble opinion they had a very good right to do so.

Probably neither their remarks nor my opinion were matters of much moment to her. She was a cold-hearted and calculating woman, but she was capable, no doubt, of enjoying herself after her own fashion, and few things can be more pleasant than to indulge in your favourite pastime, while making it subserve a definite, practical end. This, for the time being, appeared to be Lady Bracknell's enviable lot. The subjugation of Beauchamp was complete. He remained by her side the whole evening through; he scarcely took his eyes off her for a moment; and it may be assumed that he had no idea of the sorry spectacle that he presented to lookers-on. Some of these were very severe in their strictures upon him and upon his companion. More than one lady openly declared that she would not have Lady Bracknell in her house; but I knew very well (and so, I doubt not, did her ladyship), that they would ask her to their houses, and furthermore, that they would ask Beauchamp to meet her. I have often wondered why ladies to whom scandals are abhorrent should act in this way; and such is my simplicity that I am wondering still, in spite of many keys to the puzzle which have been offered to me. But that it is their habit so to do will hardly be denied.

Hilda, then, without any fear of being ostracised, gave free play to her peculiar talents and

spent a delightful evening. It would have been amusing and instructive to watch her, if one had not detested her so cordially. She had a second string to her bow, in the shape of a certain Comte de Vieuzac, a French *attaché*, whom I had met several times in Wilton Place. De Vieuzac was one of those semi-Anglicised Gauls who get their clothes made in London, whose talk is of horses and shooting, and who discuss sport with a solemnity far exceeding that of their models. Being young, by no means bad-looking, and full of that confidence in the irresistible nature of his charms which is the very last thing that his countrymen can bring themselves to part with, he most likely flattered himself that he had made a conquest of Lady Bracknell, and it was easy to see that he found Beauchamp a good deal in the way. That Beauchamp reciprocated his sentiments with interest was not less obvious; and while one of the young men assumed an aggravatingly supercilious mien and the other scowled savagely, Hilda, arbitress of the contest, sat between them, displaying her white teeth and gently swaying a black ostrich-feather fan.

In nearly all human situations tragedy and comedy are blended, so that *Jean-qui-pleure* and *Jean-qui-rit* may comment upon them with equal complacency and an equal half-measure of truth. Sometimes one feels disposed to take the side of the laughing, sometimes that of the weeping

philosopher. In the exhibition to which Lady Bracknell was so kindly treating us I suppose the comic element may be said to have predominated, and perhaps that was why I was unable to see anything funny in it. Somehow or other, the sight of that smiling, contented, selfish woman, playing off her admirers one against the other, infuriated me. I could not get the memory of poor little Sunning out of my head while I watched her; it seemed to me that of all forms of depravity the most odious is that which obliterates the natural, animal instinct of maternal love. And my soul being stirred within me by the spectacle of the power possessed and exercised by that woman, who, if she had had her deserts, would have been picking oakum in Millbank Penitentiary, I could at last contain myself no longer, but, rising from my sequestered corner, crossed the room, with the intent to do a truly silly thing.

I made straight for the sofa on which Bracknell was sitting apart, with his hands in his pockets, and asked him whether he didn't want to smoke.

"Of course I do," he growled. "Why the dickens don't these people go to bed?"

"We will give them the slip," said I; for I was bent upon having a few words in private with him. "Now is our time, while nobody is looking."

So I got him away to the smoking-room, and, as soon as we had lighted our cigars, plunged, head first, into the middle of my subject.

"Bracknell," said I, "do you or do you not intend Beauchamp to marry your sister?"

I have mentioned already that Bracknell's manners had deteriorated. He frowned heavily and asked me what the devil that was to me.

"I will tell you," I answered. "You must admit, I think, that you haven't behaved very well to Jim Leigh——"

"Good Lord!" interrupted Bracknell, "are you going back to that old story again? Why, man, I made him an apology when he reappeared in London last summer! What more would you have? I can assure you that I repent from the bottom of my heart of having deprived him of Miss Hilda Turner."

"I don't doubt it," I replied; "I only meant to remind you that you owe him a good turn. I can't go into particulars, because we shall have the other men in here presently, but the long and the short of it is that Lady Mildred and he are in love with each other."

"Oh, indeed!" said Bracknell. "Well—really I don't care."

"Does that mean," I inquired, "that you won't oppose their marriage?"

"It means," answered he, "that I shall not bother myself about the matter, one way or the other. Jim had better fight it out with the governor."

I ought, I suppose, to have been contented

with that. I had not behaved with my usual circumspection in introducing the subject at all, and I had received an assurance which, so far as it went, should have been entirely satisfactory to me. But, being so exasperated with Hilda, and being also curious to learn how far Hilda's absolute lack of principle was shared by her husband, I must needs proceed to remark:

"You once told Lady Bracknell in my presence that you would not permit her to entice Beauchamp away from your sister. You have changed your mind as to that, it appears."

Bracknell rose slowly from his chair, advanced to that in which I was seated, and placed a heavy hand on each of my shoulders, looking straight into my eyes. "Maynard," said he, "you aren't a bad sort of fellow, taking you all round; but you're just as cheeky now as you used to be at Eton, and I may as well tell you at once that I'm not in the humour to put up with cheek. Do you remember my giving you a licking once in Keate's Lane?"

"No," I replied, "I do not. I remember your hitting me and I remember kicking you on the shins, and I remember old Jim Leigh coming between us."

"Well," said Bracknell, "I dare say it was no bad thing for you that Jim Leigh happened to be handy. I didn't want to thrash you then and I don't want to thrash you now; but if you take

upon yourself to interfere with my private affairs a second time, by the Lord, I'll knock your head off your shoulders!"

This threat, which was embellished by certain expressions which I prefer not to transcribe, caused me to reflect. I do not suppose that Bracknell could have knocked my head off my shoulders, but it is quite possible that he might have managed to give me a black eye; and really I cannot afford to be seen going about with a black eye. Therefore I resolved to abstain from further provocation; and at this opportune moment our interview was interrupted by the entrance of our host, accompanied by a large detachment of his guests.

CHAPTER XIV.

I HAVE read in books and I have repeatedly heard it stated in conversation that the right time for a literary man to do his work is early in the morning; that the brain, refreshed by sleep, is then at its clearest, and that ideas flow from it with delightful rapidity while the dew is still upon the grass. The theory has a plausible sound, and may, for aught I know, be found to work satisfactorily by those who possess brains of a superior order; but my own brain, which is but a poor piece of mechanism at best and requires a good deal of humouring, is utterly intractable during the first few hours of the day, and the only results that I have ever obtained from attempting to set it in motion against its will have been a bad headache and a worse temper. I am therefore obliged to perform the greater part of my daily task after other people have retired to bed; and the consequence is that I generally eat my breakfast some time after other

people have finished theirs. This habit of mine is not without advantages of which I am especially sensible when staying in a country house; for to be obliged to make polite conversation at 9.30 A.M. is only a shade less painful than to compose an article at the same hour. There are, I am aware, houses in which one is punished for appearing late at the breakfast-table by being made to partake of cold tea and the repulsive remains of dishes upon which one's predecessors have been feasting; but nobody, it may be hoped, is absolutely compelled to visit at such houses.

On the day following that of which I spoke in the last chapter I descended from my room when the clocks were striking half-past ten, with a comfortable certainty that I should find something hot awaiting me in the dining-room. What I certainly did not expect to find there was Lady Bracknell, attended by her brace of devoted admirers. There, however, they were, all three of them, and I perceived at once that Hilda had resumed the game of the previous evening. It was a game of which, as I knew, she never wearied. She had the appearance of being well satisfied with it now; which was more than could be said for either of the other players.

"After all," she was remarking, as I entered, "I can't see why we should give ourselves airs because we ride and shoot better than most other nations. That is something, of course; but there

are so many other ways in which the French, for instance, are our superiors. They are a great deal more amusing to talk to, and they are more artistic, and they write better novels. Mr. Maynard, aren't French novels much better than ours?"

I said I must decline to deliver judgment upon that point; it was a matter of taste.

"Well, but," broke in Beauchamp, who was looking decidedly cross, "I never denied it. I'm sure I don't know whether their novels are better than ours, and, to tell you the truth, I don't much care either. All I said was that they are not a sporting people."

"There is more variety of sport in France than in England," said de Vieuzac boldly. "We have, for example, the wolf and the wild boar——"

"And you gallop after 'em in green and gold coats, with horns twisted round and round your bodies," interrupted Beauchamp, not over courteously.

"You have perhaps derived your ideas of French sport from the pictures in *Punch*," observed de Vieuzac, without losing his temper. "They are funny, those pictures, they are very funny; but I do not think that the artists have drawn them from life."

"I have been in France," returned the other doggedly, "and I've seen a lot of *chasseurs*, as you call them, shooting cock-sparrows on Sunday afternoons."

De Vieuzac shrugged his shoulders. "You will

come to it, my good friend," said he. "What would you have? We are a little in advance of you; we made our revolution a hundred years ago. When your game-laws are abolished, when your great estates are broken up, when your country squires can no more live upon their rents —then you will see what you will see. For the rest, the persons who, as you say, shoot sparrows on Sundays are not of the rank who would shoot partridges if they were Englishmen; and you must not ask of a man that he should be a good game-shot when he has never the occasion to shoot at game."

"At any rate," observed Hilda, rising and bestowing a gracious smile upon the speaker, "we all know that M. de Vieuzac can shoot as well as anybody. And isn't it time for you to go out shooting now?"

Beauchamp held the door open for her. "We are to have a ride this afternoon, are we not?" I heard him ask eagerly.

"Of course we are," she answered. "Didn't you promise to take me out?" And then, turning to the other, "M. de Vieuzac, I am going to be very selfish and make you join us. You will have to tear yourself away from the partridges and be in time for luncheon."

The Frenchman raised his eyebrows slightly and bowed, murmuring something about Lady Bracknell's wishes being law. Possibly he

thought that a ride in company with his rival would not be very good fun.

As for Beauchamp, he did not attempt to conceal his disgust. "Perhaps you will ride with me some other day. If I'm not wanted I'd just as soon shoot this afternoon," he was beginning; but the closing of the door deprived me of the remainder of his sentence, as well as of Hilda's reply. However, it was pretty certain that he would do what she ordered him, whether he liked it or not.

After I was left alone, I spent some five minutes of my valuable time in wondering why Lady Bracknell had asked de Vieuzac to spoil poor Beauchamp's afternoon. Were I a lady of great personal attractions, I should, I dare say, enjoy having several admirers; but I should certainly prefer to take them one at a time. That a second may be found useful as a means of stimulating the ardour of the first I can understand; but the object of keeping them together after that result has been fully obtained is not so easy to discover. Sometimes I have an uncomfortable fear that my tutor was right in the opinion which he expressed about me long ago, and that I am not quite as clever as I think myself. I ought undoubtedly to have guessed what her ladyship was up to, and my only comfort is in the reflection that if I failed to do so, it was because my estimate of human nature is pitched too high.

I did not go out shooting with Bracknell and the others that morning, nor was I able to put in an appearance at the luncheon hour. I had to finish an admirable essay upon Proportional Representation for the *Eclectic Review*, and, getting my arguments into a knot towards the last pages (which, I am sorry to say, is no uncommon experience of mine when composing admirable essays), I was chained to my desk until the afternoon was far advanced, struggling to reconcile certain irreconcileable statements to which I had committed myself, and which I was unwilling to retract. Having at length made up my mind to throw one of these overboard for the sake of harmony, I wound up my task and sallied forth to take the air.

The house in which I was staying stood in the midst of one of those wild, undulating parks which are more frequent in the northern than in the southern counties and which look like a survival of the England of three hundred years ago. It was very beautiful in its way, under the grey, autumnal sky, with shafts of pale sunlight falling upon the gnarled oaks and the withered bracken, and upon patches of gorse and heather here and there. I had walked some distance across it and was wondering whether de Vieuzac's unpleasant prophecy would ever be fulfilled—whether the land upon which I was standing would ever be parcelled out among peasant proprietors, and

whether, in that case, the peasant proprietors would not find out that they had made an uncommonly bad bargain, when the thud of approaching hoofs interrupted my musings, and presently Lady Bracknell, riding between her two cavaliers, hove in sight.

They were pleased to draw rein on recognising me, and Hilda said they had had a delightful ride; which assertion was received with emphatic silence by her companions. In all probability some bickering had taken place during the course of it; for the two men were looking daggers at each other, and it struck me that de Vieuzac was not quite as cool as he had been earlier in the day. A short distance ahead of us was an inclosure, surrounded by a high fence of posts and rails, like a large cattle-pen. It may have been intended to serve that purpose, or possibly, at certain seasons of the year, to confine the red-deer, of which there was a herd in the park.

"There," said de Vieuzac, pointing to it with his whip, and looking at Beauchamp, "would be a pretty leap. You could take it, perhaps?—you who hesitate at nothing."

"Oh, do, Mr. Beauchamp!" exclaimed Hilda, enthusiastically.

"My dear Lady Bracknell," I remonstrated, "what are you thinking of? The thing is absolutely impossible."

I am not sure that it was impossible; I am an

indifferent judge of matters of that kind, and I have read wonderful accounts of the high jumps accomplished by Australian horses. But I should certainly be very sorry either to attempt such a feat myself, or to see any friend of mine attempt it. Hilda did not seem to have heard me.

"Oh, do try!" she repeated. "I know you would get over all right."

Beauchamp's reply was highly creditable to his good sense and self-control. "I might get over," he said. "Whether I could get out again is another question. But, anyhow, I couldn't think of risking it with another man's horse."

De Vieuzac smiled; and Beauchamp turned upon him at once. "What's that you say?" he asked sharply.

"I assure you," answered the Frenchman, with exaggerated politeness, "that I did not utter one word."

"You were thinking something though."

"Oh, for that, yes. I was thinking something, I admit. I was thinking that sometimes it is very convenient to be riding a friend's horse."

The words amounted to a studied insult, and would unquestionably have been so accepted in de Vieuzac's own country. In France speeches of that kind are permissible, their consequences being, of course, well understood; but neither in France nor elsewhere is it customary to offer such direct provocation in the presence of a lady, and

Beauchamp went up several degrees in my esteem when he answered quietly: "We'll discuss the question afterwards, if you like. We may as well ride on now."

Hilda suddenly broke into a short laugh, touched her horse with the whip and galloped away. The two men followed her. I confess that I hurried back to the house as fast as my legs would carry me. I dislike and deprecate quarrels above everything; still, if quarrels must needs take place, why should I not be there to see? After de Vieuzac's inexcusable conduct, I felt that it would be a real satisfaction to me to see him knocked down, and I thought that if I made great haste, I might just manage to arrive in time. As it turned out, I reached the front door with several minutes to spare. From the flight of steps which led up to it I could descry the riders, who, perhaps, had made a *détour*, approaching at a foot's pace, and presently I had the honour of assisting Lady Bracknell to dismount.

She stood for a moment, tapping her foot with her riding-whip, and looking with an odd, satirical expression at the rivals. "*Au revoir*," she said, nodding to them; "I am going to lie down till dinner-time." Then she made a scarcely perceptible sign with her hand to Beauchamp, who ran up the steps after her and accompanied her into the house.

De Vieuzac and I remained where we were.

I suppose we both knew that Beauchamp would be out again directly. And indeed the horses had hardly been led away to the stables before he emerged and made straight for us.

"M. de Vieuzac," said he, "you hinted just now that I was a coward. May I ask whether that was what you meant?"

The Frenchman straightened his back, brought his heels together, twirled his moustache, and replied: "You are at liberty, sir, to place any construction upon my words that may suit your pleasure."

"In good English, I suppose that means that you want to fight. If you had been an Englishman I should have hit you straight between the eyes, and it would have done you a lot of good; but as you're a foreigner, I'm afraid we can't settle it that way."

"The method," observed de Vieuzac sweetly, "seems a little barbarous. For me, I confess that I have not learnt to box; but with the sword or the pistol I shall be charmed to hold myself at your disposition. You do not, perhaps, use those weapons?"

"Oh, don't we though!" returned Beauchamp, with a short laugh. "I shall be happy to prove the contrary to you when and where you please; only of course it can't be in this country. If it's the same thing to you, I should prefer to stay out my time here; but next week I will meet you

at Ostend or any other place you choose to name."

The Frenchman bowed. "It is usual," said he, "to leave all details to be arranged by the seconds in these affairs. Will you then be so kind as to mention two gentlemen whose names and addresses I may give to the friends whom I shall ask to represent me?"

Beauchamp rubbed the back of his head. "I don't want this talked about all over the place, you know," he said. "Maynard, you've heard it all; perhaps you'll be good enough to act for me—and find some other fellow who can hold his tongue. And look here," he added, turning to de Vieuzac, "we had better pretend to be friends for the next few days. Don't you think so?"

"Sir," replied the Frenchman magnificently, "I shall withdraw. I should be desolated to be the occasion of embarrassment, and I will leave for London to-morrow."

With that, he took off his hat, bowing low. Beauchamp stared, looked rather inclined to laugh, then nodded and turned back into the house. And so this sanguinary encounter was agreed upon.

CHAPTER XV.

As a matter of theory, it has always seemed to me that the *duello* is, upon the whole, the best means that can be devised of wiping out a mortal affront or injury. It would, no doubt, be intolerable that one should be called upon to stand up and be shot at because some bully or other had purposely trodden upon one's toe; and we are accustomed to hear that it was in order to put a stop to such highly unpleasant liabilities that duelling was suppressed in England. Nevertheless, it is not easy to say what ought to be done to a man who calls you a coward to your face. To take no notice is hardly within the capacity of the meekest of mortals; to appeal for protection to the law is no salve for wounded honour; and so there seems to be nothing for it but a scrimmage with fists or walking-sticks. Now I must say that every affray of that kind which has taken place in my time (and there have been several such) has

been supremely ridiculous and undignified : therefore, pacific though my own nature is, and much as I should hate to see the sword-point of an adversary quivering within an inch of my nose, I am inclined to think that the duel ought to have been retained as an ultimate resort. Such being my sentiments, and Beauchamp having been most unequivocally and grievously insulted by deVieuzac, I could not but applaud the course taken by the former. However, it is one thing to approve of a given quarrel in the abstract and quite another to allow oneself to be mixed up in it, to see one's name mentioned and one's private character discussed in all the newspapers, and even perhaps to be haled before the authorities and cast into prison. Deep, then, would have been my consternation when my young friend so coolly nominated me as his second, if I had thought that there was any probability of my actually figuring in that capacity ; and the genial alacrity with which I accepted the greatness thrust upon me was, I allow, due solely to the circumstance that I had not the remotest intention of permitting a hostile meeting to occur.

The line of conduct which I adopted, with a view to avert bloodshed, was simple, and, as I flattered myself, likely to prove effectual. I slipped away from the dinner-table, that evening, a little before the other men, and, hurrying into the drawing-room, seated myself beside Lady Bracknell, who was reclining in an easy-chair

apart and was doubtless waiting for one or other of her victims to join her.

"Allow me," said I (for I was resolved not to spare her), "to congratulate you upon your energy and determination. If you could have persuaded Beauchamp to break his neck at that fence this afternoon, it would have been very nice. You would have been an immensely rich woman at this moment, and probably nobody, except my unworthy self, would have suspected you of being a murderess, in addition to your other claims to notoriety. But the wretched creature wouldn't jump, and so you had to fall back upon your original plan of inducing that Frenchman to challenge him and kill him. I am sorry to disappoint you; but that plan of yours will have to be abandoned. You must try to cook Beauchamp's goose in what the cookery books call 'another way.'"

Hilda burst into scornful laughter. "What in the world are you talking about?" she asked. "Have you lost your senses?"

"Not at all," I replied; "I retain possession of them and place a modest reliance upon their evidence. But surely yours were not quite as acute as usual when you cast yourself for the part of Lucrezia Borgia. Tragedy, believe me, is not your forte, and as often as you attempt it you will break down. Don't you see that if this rather diabolical plot of yours had succeeded, you would never have been able to show your face in any

decent society again? Do you really imagine that there would have been the slightest doubt in anybody's mind as to who had instigated the duel between two men whom you have been openly endeavouring to set by the ears ever since your arrival here? The best thing that you can do now is to get your fire-eating Frenchman to make an apology, which you will instruct Beauchamp to accept."

Hilda's face was not ordinarily an expressive one; but as she turned it towards me now, there swept across it a look of such vindictive malice that I inwardly recanted my criticism upon her tragic capabilities. However, she soon subdued that passing emotion and laughed again. "I don't in the least understand you," she declared; "I know nothing of any duel, and how can I help it if a couple of foolish young men choose to quarrel? It appears to me that you have been drinking too much wine, and I should be much obliged if you would go away for the present."

"With pleasure," I replied, rising. "Do you absolutely refuse, then, to be a peacemaker?"

"I refuse," she answered, somewhat defiantly, "to be dictated to by you. I don't believe what you say, and I shall not make myself ridiculous by trying to smooth down a quarrel which most likely exists only in your imagination."

That was all that I obtained from her; but in truth I had not expected more; and in addressing

such very plain-spoken remarks to her I had been actuated rather by curiosity as to how she would take them than by any hope that they would divert her from her purpose. The person whom I did hope to influence was de Vieuzac. Him I waylaid an hour later, as he was entering the smoking-room, and drew him away into the billiard-room, which adjoined that apartment, and which, fortunately, was untenanted.

"M. de Vieuzac," I began, "it is quite out of the question that you should fight young Beauchamp, and I think you will admit as much when I have given you my reasons for saying so."

He interrupted me with suave courtesy, observing that the subject was no longer one which he could properly discuss. Any remarks which I might have to make must be addressed to his friends the Count de Something and the Marquis de Something-else, who would not fail to call upon me in due course.

I replied that it would be needless to give his friends that trouble. "Of course," I continued, "you will not pretend that the ostensible cause of your quarrel is the real one."

"The cause of quarrel," returned he, "is of perfect simplicity. I have used words which I decline to withdraw and by which Mr. Beauchamp conceives himself to be wounded. And permit me once more, sir, to tell you that this conversation is most irregular."

"I dare say it is," I rejoined, "but you had better listen to me all the same. The lady who is at the bottom of all this——"

"Mr. Maynard," interrupted de Vieuzac, "it is impossible that I should listen to you. You scandalise me—positively you scandalise me! What! you speak of a lady!—you would perhaps in another moment go so far as to mention her by name! It is unheard of! I must beg of you, sir, to excuse me." And he made for the door.

"Very well," said I, "have it your own way then, if you are determined to bring about an explosion. Since you insist upon it, your friends shall talk the affair over with me and with Lord Bracknell, who will be my coadjutor."

De Vieuzac paused upon the threshold and pulled his moustache. "Lord Bracknell!" he ejaculated. "Is that Mr. Beauchamp's choice, may I ask?"

"Oh, no; it is my choice. You heard him give me leave to select a colleague, and such is the selection that I propose to make."

This brought the Frenchman to his bearings. He returned slowly and consented, under protest, to hear me. "What is it that you have to say?" he inquired.

"Why, simply this," I replied. "Mr. Beauchamp, as you are probably not aware, is the present holder of very large estates, which, in the event of his dying without issue, would pass to his cousin, Lord Bracknell. Consequently, if he were

to die suddenly within a short time, a certain lady whose name we won't mention would be snatched from the brink of bankruptcy and raised to a position of great wealth. Now, suppose that, by a misadventure which I am sure you would be the first to deplore, but which you might not be able to avert, you were to kill that young man. What do you think would be said of you and of the unnamed lady? Or suppose, without going so far as that, that you only wounded him. Is it not certain that everybody would declare that you had done your best to kill him? To me, at any rate, it is very evident that the insult which you offered him to-day was a mere pretext, and that you had deliberately made up your mind to fasten a quarrel upon him."

The Frenchman's countenance, while I was speaking, exhibited various phases of emotion; but now he blazed forth with sudden fury and sprang at me like a wild cat. "Sir," he hissed out, "do you dare to accuse me of being an assassin?"

"Certainly not," I replied, drawing back a few paces as a precautionary measure, "but I think you are in some danger of incurring that accusation from others." Then, as he eyed me in a suspicious manner and appeared to be hesitating, I continued: "Allow me, as an insular barbarian, to speak the truth to you without phrases. The fact is that you have been made a cat's-paw of by

the most thoroughly unscrupulous woman of my acquaintance. I venture to think that it would be more consistent with your honour and dignity to apologise to Beauchamp, whom you can't really believe to be a coward, than to fight him for the sake of Lady Bracknell, whom I have known all my life and who, I can assure you, is not worth a drop of honest blood. In any case, depend upon it that we shall not allow our man to go out with you. Lord Bracknell would not dare to sanction such a meeting, even if he were—what I am convinced that he is not—as infamous a wretch as his wife."

"*Taisez-vous donc!*" whispered de Vieuzac hurriedly.

But his caution came too late. In my anxiety to bring conviction home to the mind of my interlocutor, I had not noticed the entrance of a third person, and now, when I looked round and saw Bracknell standing close to my elbow, I perceived that the cat was out of the bag.

"You don't mince matters, Maynard," Bracknell observed. "After that very frank expression of opinion, I dare say you won't object to my asking what you are talking about."

"Our conversation was strictly confidential," broke in de Vieuzac, with some eagerness. "Neither Mr. Maynard nor I have the right to repeat it."

Bracknell glanced at him for a moment, as a

big dog glances at a little one, and then turned to me again. "Come," he said, "I am waiting to hear in what respect I am less infamous than my wife?"

It seemed best to answer him. "M. de Vieuzac and Beauchamp have fallen out," I replied, "and unfortunately the difference has ended in a challenge, you and I being nominated as Beauchamp's seconds. When you came in, I was trying to point out that, as you are heir-presumptive to Beauchamp's estates, you could not let him risk his life in such a way."

"I should have thought," remarked Bracknell coolly, "that a man from whom one has expectations would have been the man of all others whom one would like to see risking his life."

"I doubt," I replied, "whether you would like it—under the circumstances."

"Oh, the circumstances, eh? And pray, what are they?"

"It is needless to speak of them," cried de Vieuzac, before I could answer. "Mr. Maynard has convinced me that I have been in the wrong, and I shall hasten to offer my excuses to Mr. Beauchamp. I have only to add that if you consider yourself in any way aggrieved by me, my lord, I shall hold myself entirely at your disposition."

"You seem to be spoiling for a fight," remarked Bracknell. "I don't know that I have any griev-

ance against you; but I'll do my best to indulge you by discovering one."

The Frenchman bowed, pirouetted round on his heels, and left the room.

"Now, Harry," said Bracknell, "perhaps you'll explain yourself. Of course I can guess what those two idiots quarrelled about, but it seems to me that 'infamous wretch' is pretty strong language for a cautious fellow like you to use. Between you and me, what did you mean by it?"

Perhaps I was hardly justified in telling him, but at that moment I really did not see for whose sake I was bound to be reticent. To my mind there was nothing very extraordinary in such a woman as Hilda wishing to get Beauchamp out of the way and step into his shoes. It has always seemed to me that murderers are only regarded with greater abhorrence and punished more severely than other criminals because we all have such a strong dislike to the idea of being murdered, and that the man who slanders or cheats me is morally just about as culpable as the man who knocks me on the head. Therefore, when I had related the events of the day to Bracknell, I was a good deal astonished at the effect produced upon him by my narrative. He strode up and down the room, muttering furious imprecations and working himself up into such a state of blind rage that I determined not to let him out of my sight until he should have become

calmer. If Lady Bracknell had made her appearance just then, I don't know what catastrophe might not have happened.

But the storm soon spent itself. Presently he came and sat down beside me, saying quietly, "That Frenchman behaved rather well, I think."

"Well, yes," I agreed, "I think he did. He is a gentleman and he will hold his tongue; but I suspect that you won't see him at your house any more."

"Hardly! For the matter of that, I sha'n't have a house much longer. I'm utterly smashed, and I suppose every stick in my possession will be sold up. Her ladyship will be a pleasant sort of companion to face grinding poverty with, won't she? I expect she'll go back to her father though. After all that has happened, I don't see that I am bound to go on living with her. Well, what are you making grimaces at? You think it's a case of the pot calling the kettle black, perhaps? I'm black enough, goodness knows! but you yourself said just now that you didn't believe I had sunk to her depth of infamy. I allowed her to have her own way with regard to Beauchamp, which, if you like, was not pretty behaviour; but she represented to me that the young fool was mad about her, that he would never marry Mildred, and that, for poor little Sunning's sake, it would be a thousand pities to let that huge fortune slip between our fingers. She didn't put it quite so

coarsely as that; she can express herself in a very pleasant and convincing sort of way when she chooses, and I dare say I wasn't unwilling to be convinced." Bracknell paused for a moment and sighed. "You remember what I said to you the day my poor little man died," he went on presently. "I haven't been able to endure the sight of her since then, and I haven't cared two straws how she amused herself or what her plots and plans might be. It was all one to me. But I never suspected her of anything so fiendish as compassing a friend's death in order to get hold of his money. No, by Jove! I never suspected her of that. I shall tell Beauchamp about it."

"I think you had better not," I said.

"I shall though," he returned; "it's the least I can do. If that doesn't cure him, nothing will; and I owe it to him to do my best to cure him. I shouldn't be surprised if he went off and married Mildred after all."

"It would be a fitting conclusion to this highly creditable business," I could not help remarking. "Shall you urge Lady Mildred to accept him now?"

"No," answered Bracknell shortly, "I am not going to urge anybody to do anything; they may muddle it out among them. As for me, about the best thing I could do would be to put a bullet into my head. I'm sick of all this!"

Thereupon he got up and strode away, leaving

me not altogether dissatisfied with my evening's work. "There will at least be no duel now," thought I to myself. "Hilda's machinations have ended in a complete fiasco; and, unless I am very much mistaken, she is about to pass through the most uncomfortable quarter of an hour of her ill-spent life."

CHAPTER XVI.

MURDER, the proverb tells us, will out; and although of course, we do not know how many murders have remained undiscovered, appearances seem to lend support to the theory. In like manner, I have always observed that anything in the shape of a scandal is sure to become public property, however much it may be to the interest of those concerned in it to keep their own counsel; and a very comforting thought this should be to the numerous persons who love a choice bit of scandal above everything. That de Vieuzac and Beauchamp had had a mortal quarrel; that they had been within an ace of slitting one another's weasands in the good old-fashioned style; that they had only been pacified by the joint exertions of Lord Bracknell and the reader's humble servant; and that a scene of the most distressing and dramatic nature had taken place subsequently between Lady Bracknell and her incensed husband —these things were known all over the house

before I left my bedroom the next morning; and when I made my appearance I found my fellow guests upon the tiptoe of joyous excitement and curiosity. If they gained no further information from me, it was not for want of asking for it; nor, I imagine, would the appeased rivals have escaped cross-examination, had not those gentlemen wisely sought safety in flight. They must have journeyed up to London by the early express together; and I should much have liked to hear what they conversed about by the way, but had no opportunity of making inquiries as to that until the whole subject had ceased to interest me.

However, that I may not seem to exalt myself unduly by affecting a superiority to the weaknesses of my neighbours, I will confess that I was most anxious to obtain some account of the lecture which Bracknell had doubtless administered to his wife; because I thought it likely that this had been expressed in fine, forcible English, such as one is always glad to listen to in these days of roundabout phrases and involved construction. My hostess, looking rather hard at me, informed me that the Bracknells were leaving that morning; so that I was obliged to bolt my breakfast in a terrible hurry. For, after all the trouble that I had taken in the matter, I should have been truly vexed had I been denied the satisfaction of seeing her ladyship's face before she departed.

As it fell out, I was privileged not only to see her face but to hear her voice; and I don't know when I have enjoyed anything more than the interview of ten minutes or so which she was pleased to accord to me in the conservatory, where I discovered her. A deeply discomfited woman was she that day, and bitter were the reproaches with which she assailed me.

"This has been your doing from first to last!" she exclaimed. "All the misery and disgrace that may come of it will lie at you door."

And when I replied that I accepted the whole responsibility and gloried in it, she fairly lost her temper—a thing that was not usual with her—declaring that that only showed what an empty-headed, conceited idiot I was. "You think yourself so wise that you must needs have a finger in every one's business. I should very much like to know whom you flatter yourself that you have benefited this time! Not your friend, Jim Leigh, at all events; for, mark my words, Mr. Beauchamp will go straight off and propose to Mildred now. I need not tell you that she will accept him. For all her demure airs, she knows the value of a large income as well as anybody. As for me, you have certainly done me an ill turn, if that is any satisfaction to you—which I suppose it is. For the last five or six years I have shown you every possible civility; I have had you to dinner again and again when you bored me to death, and I

have introduced you into lots of good houses which you know very well that you would never have entered but for me. Naturally, therefore, you hate me. Why you should hate Bracknell I don't know; but you have very effectually ruined him. Alfred Beauchamp's marriage means bankruptcy to him—neither more nor less than that."

She must have been very angry to use such candour. "You admit then, dear Lady Bracknell," I observed, "that your purpose was to improve the family prospects by getting Alfred Beauchamp killed out of the way."

"I admit no such thing," she returned, "and I defy you to produce one atom of proof that I wanted him to fight M. de Vieuzac. I will admit that I flirted with him. If that shocks you, you are welcome to be shocked. It didn't shock Bracknell, who knew quite well what I was doing, and why I did it. That much he couldn't deny last night, in spite of all his raving and storming."

"Did he rave and storm?" I inquired, with interest.

"Yes, he did. He said such abominable things to me that I have very great doubts as to whether I can continue to live with him."

"You will wait, I presume," said I, "until you see whether there is a chance of his having anything to live upon."

Why this remark should have exasperated her

I cannot tell: possibly because it expressed nothing more than the simple truth. At all events, she turned upon me quite furiously. "You think it is safe to insult me, do you?" she cried. "You will find yourself mistaken. I have a very good memory, and I am not likely to forget what I owe you. The day will come when you will be sorry for having meddled with me."

That day may come; but it has not come yet, and I am still unrepentant. I believe I am one of the very few people who can boast of having put Lady Bracknell into a passion.

She and her husband drove down to the station together, but, as I understood, parted there, her ladyship making for another country house, to which she had been invited, while Bracknell went up to London. Thither I also betook myself on the following day; and there, shortly afterwards, I received a letter from my mother, in which I was begged to run down and see her.

"I am feeling uneasy about our friends at Staines Court," she wrote, "and should be very glad to have a little talk with you. The young man Beauchamp has arrived. I fear, but am not sure, that he has come for the purpose of renewing his *most unwelcome* attentions."

How this bad behaviour of the young man Beauchamp was to be checked by my advent upon the scene did not appear; but of course I hastened to obey my mother's summons, and on

reaching my journey's end, whom should I find waiting for me upon the platform but Jim Leigh. He said he had heard that I was expected by that train, and had thought he would come down and meet me, which was highly flattering.

"I've got the dog-cart here," he added, "so that I can drop you at your house if you like; but don't you think a walk would do you good, after being shut up in that stuffy railway-carriage? The cart can take your traps on for you."

It was not exactly pleasant weather for walking, the roads and lanes being deep in mud, and a gusty wind having been blowing all day from the north-west, with occasional showers of cold rain, which seemed likely to be succeeded by snow; but as it was evident that Jim had a great deal to say to me, I would not baulk him of his purpose.

"You know," he began, as soon as we had set out, "what I told you in London last summer about Lady Mildred."

"Yes," I answered. "If I remember rightly you were disturbed in mind about her matrimonial prospects and your object was to induce Beauchamp to espouse her."

"My dear Harry," returned Jim, gravely, "circumstances alter cases. I don't know whether that ever was exactly what you could call my object, but anyhow it isn't my object now. I thought at that time that she really cared for Beauchamp."

"I perceive," said I, "what the circumstances are which have altered the case, and I heartily congratulate both you and Lady Mildred. There will be a row, of course; but you must try not to mind a row."

Jim sighed deeply. "It isn't so simple as all that, you know," he said. "I believe I have told you already that Mildred is an angel—a positive saint upon earth!"

"I think I remember your mentioning it," I replied. "What then? Is it characteristic of saints and angels to marry men whom they don't love and throw over those to whom they are attached?"

"Why, of course it is," returned Jim, with a shade of impatience. "Given certain conditions, that is precisely what a saint or an angel would do."

"I cannot," I observed, "pretend to your familiarity with the ways of those celestial beings, but to a mere earthly intelligence like mine it does appear——"

"Now, Harry," interrupted Jim, "don't go on in that way. It isn't the least bit funny, and it's no help to a fellow. Just allow me to speak for a few minutes and I'll tell you how matters stand."

Having thus ruthlessly snubbed me and reduced me to silence, he proceeded (though, I must say, not very lucidly), to redeem his promise.

The upshot of what he had to say was that he had been unable to refrain from avowing his love to Lady Mildred, and that, to his unutterable joy, he had discovered that his love was returned. She had, however, declared most positively that she considered herself bound in honour to carry out her father's wishes, should it be in her power to do so, and I gathered that the only thing which had hitherto kept this luckless pair from breaking their hearts was a comforting conviction that, after all, this would not be in her power. Even Lord Staines—who, in accordance with the intention which he had expressed to me, had remonstrated firmly but kindly with his daughter—had acknowledged that there is no known method of marrying a man who won't ask you to marry him. "And I really believe," added Jim, "that if Beauchamp had distinctly refused to come forward, he wouldn't have had any serious objection to me."

"In other words, if he can't get £40,000 a year, he will be graciously pleased to put up with a sixth of that sum," I observed.

"Well, it isn't only a question of income; there's the debt that I told you about. However, Beauchamp *has* come forward at last, and I confess to you frankly, Harry, that I'm at my wit's end. I don't see my way at all."

"Has Beauchamp proposed?" I inquired.

"Not yet; but he may do it any day. In fact, it is quite certain that he has come here in order

to do it. He wrote to Lady Mildred, offering himself for a week, which he would hardly have done unless he had meant business. From what he has let fall, I suspect that he has had a quarrel with Lady Bracknell, and has decided to cut himself off from her. Old Staines is as pleased as Punch; he looks upon the thing as settled. Harry, what the deuce am I to do?"

"Don't you think," I suggested, "that, under all the circumstances, Lady Mildred might be your best adviser?"

But he shook his head despondently. "She has made up her mind," he answered; "she has no doubt at all as to what her duty is; she is ready to sacrifice herself for the sake of her family. But am I to stand quietly looking on while this sacrifice is carried out? That's the question."

It was not altogether easy to answer him. The situation was one which has repeated itself often enough in history and legend. Iphigenia got out of her awkward predicament, as we know, in a manner more or less satisfactory to all parties concerned, but where, in this case, were we to look for the *deus ex machinâ* who should fulfil the father's vow and sever the daughter's chains by one happy stroke?

"Obviously," I said at length, "either the family or Lady Mildred must be sacrificed; and, all things considered, I think the family ought to go to the wall."

"But she won't consent to that," answered Jim ruefully.

"Exactly so; and therefore I don't see what course is open to you, except to stand and look on. Have you thought of any alternative plan?"

"None," he replied disconsolately. "I was in hopes that you, who are so much sharper than I am, might be able to suggest something."

I was gratified by the compliment, but conscious of my inability to show myself worthy of it. Certainly I could have devised several excellent schemes, but in order to work them it would have been essential to obtain Lady Mildred's acquiescence. What was to be done, so long as the victim obstinately refused to raise her head from the block? However, not to discourage my unfortunate friend more than was necessary, I promised him that I would think the dilemma over very carefully; and, either because drowning men will clutch at straws or because he really had a misplaced confidence in my abilities, this assurance seemed to comfort him a good deal.

At my own gate, where we found his dog-cart waiting, he bade me good-bye. "I shall look you up to-morrow afternoon, old chap," said he. "By that time, I'll be bound to say, you'll have hit upon some idea." In which over-sanguine anticipation he drove away.

And now it was that my dear mother showed the spirited stuff of which she is made. Not a

word would she listen to of my sober representations as to the danger of intermeddling with our neighbours' affairs, and when I was shabby enough to quote her against herself, reminding her that these things were ordered for us and that all was doubtless for the best, though we, with our limited intelligence, might not be able to see it, she became quite angry.

"Another time," said she, "I will show you the folly and wickedness of such talk. For the present, it is enough to say that I will not have my poor Mildred married to a man whom she detests in payment of anybody's debts."

"I don't think she detests him," I answered, "but let that pass. How are you going to prevent her from being handed over to him?"

Thereupon, to my utter amazement, she coolly informed me that she intended to go up to Staines Court and beard the new Agamemnon in his den. As she had not been outside the limits of our own garden for a matter of twenty years, and as the only conveyance that we possess is a two-wheeled pony-cart, it may be imagined how this proposition took my breath away.

"Lord Staines," she went on, with a smile, "is too feeble to leave the house. The mountain will not come to Mahomet, so Mahomet must go to the mountain. I shall write and ask him to send a carriage for me, and you must hoist me into it somehow."

This proposed borrowing of the enemy's transport in order to reach the battle-field was a stroke of humour which I appreciated, but I could not, of course, sanction it. It was not, however, until I had assured my mother that she should only leave the house over my prostrate body that she yielded, with a very bad grace, saying: "So be it, then; but please to understand, Henry, that I see my duty plainly marked out for me, and that I shall not be deterred from doing it. You must bring this Mr. Beauchamp to call upon me."

When my mother addresses me as "Henry," it means that she is in no mood to be trifled with. Accordingly I walked up to Staines Court the next morning, asked for Beauchamp, told him what a pleasure it was to meet him again (a pleasure in which he did not appear to participate), and mentioned that my mother, who lived hard by, was most anxious to make his acquaintance. He was a polite young man, and, though evidently much surprised by this sudden development of friendliness on my part, he made no difficulty about returning home with me.

My mother received him in that bright little up stairs sitting-room where so much of her life has been spent, and about which there always clings a faint, old-fashioned smell of *pot-pourri*. She is a very beautiful and refined-looking old lady, and it is my belief that she is perfectly aware of the fact. I noticed that she was wearing

a little of the treasured Mechlin lace which belonged to her great-grandmother, and as soon as she opened her lips I perceived that she had put on her very best manner, which, like the lace, is only assumed upon occasions of importance.

She made me place a chair for Beauchamp beside her sofa and smiled graciously upon him over the top of a large fan, which she swayed gently to and fro while she spoke. "It is very good of you, sir," she began, "to visit a bed-ridden old woman whose conversation can have few attractions for you. Indeed, I should not have ventured to put you to so much inconvenience, had I not had a special motive for doing so."

I suppose Beauchamp had never heard anything like this before in all his days. He was quite unaccustomed to being called "sir" and condescended to, and it evidently flustered him.

"Oh, but really, you know, Mrs. Maynard—upon my word—delighted, I'm sure!" said he, with all the graceful eloquence of the age.

"You are so kind," resumed my mother suavely, "as to say so, but I must not flatter myself that your presence here is due to any other cause than to the courtesy which, as I have always understood, is natural to you."

She went on in this strain for some little time, gradually working up to her point, and anything funnier in its way than the contrast

which she presented to her bewildered interlocutor I have seldom witnessed. At length she shut up her fan with a snap, exclaiming, more in sorrow than in anger:

"And can what I hear be true, Mr. Beauchamp! Can it be that you, a gentleman and a man of honour, are not only forcing your attentions upon a lady to whom they are distasteful, but that you have actually made her acceptance of your hand the subject of a pecuniary bargain with her father?"

He assured her earnestly that it was not true: she had been misinformed. Nothing would induce him to force his attentions upon anybody who—who—in short, who didn't want them. "And as for a bargain, there really never was any bargain at all—at least, not in the way that you mean—there wasn't indeed! I'm sure I shall be only too happy to oblige you, Mrs. Maynard, if you'll tell me what you wish me to do, and if you won't be—excuse me!—quite so *awfully* polite about it."

Thus adjured, my mother consented to unbend and make her meaning plain. Without mentioning Jim's name, she gave it to be understood that Lady Mildred's affections were engaged; after which, she discreetly insinuated that although, under such circumstances, Mr. Beauchamp must feel that it would be out of the question to take advantage of her filial submissiveness, yet, in

some ways, too abrupt a withdrawal on his part was to be deprecated.

"Lord Staines," said she, "is an old man and in broken health. From what the doctor tells me, I fear that he may not be with us much longer, and we should all wish to spare him, if possible, the shock of a sudden disappointment."

"I see," broke in Beauchamp, with a knowing nod. "After what you've told me, I wouldn't for the world marry poor little Mildred. In fact, to tell the truth, I never was very keen about it. And we'll manage to humbug the old boy as long as he lives."

My mother drew herself up and looked severe. "You surprise me, Mr. Beauchamp," she said. "Surely you do not suppose that I am advising a course of deception!"

Here I judged it opportune to put in my oar. "Nobody," quoth I, from the background, "could suppose anything so unwarrantable. You will not be called upon to use deception, my dear Beauchamp, only a little diplomacy, a little tact."

"Harry," said my mother, "I am quite ashamed of being so troublesome, but *would* you mind going down stairs and seeing whether my knitting is in the library? If it is not there, it may perhaps be on one of the chairs in the drawing-room. Or possibly it may have become entangled in Sarah's skirts, as it sometimes does, and been

swept down into the kitchen. At any rate, I feel sure that it must be somewhere."

If there is one thing for which I am more remarkable than for my humility I suppose it is my obedience. I was absent for exactly five-and-twenty minutes, and when I came back to say that the knitting was nowhere to be found, I was not at all surprised to find my mother tranquilly occupied with it, nor was there any need to inform me that the two conspirators had arrived at a perfect mutual understanding.

Upon the morality of the compact thus entered into I made no comment at the time, and forbear from making any now; but I will say for my mother that she had the grace to feel thoroughly ashamed of herself, as was shown by the shortness of her manner during the rest of the day and by the vindictive determination with which she insisted upon reading a long sermon to me and the servants that evening after prayers, although it was the middle of the week.

CHAPTER XVII.

If I were asked to mention the man of my acquaintance whom I consider the least fitted, by nature and by habit, to impose upon a child of average acuteness, I should unhesitatingly name Jim Leigh. Yet such is the power of love, and so prone are the best of us to listen to casuistical arguments, that he embarked upon the career of duplicity suggested to him by his friends with a readiness, not to say a zest, of which he ought certainly to have been incapable. That he and Lady Mildred and Beauchamp were actuated by the best of good motives in behaving as they did I don't deny; but, as a more or less impartial looker-on, I felt my sympathies veering round, while I watched them, to the side of the unsuspecting old man who was so completely taken in by their manœuvres. Lord Staines, I believe, looked upon his daughter's engagement as being to all intents and purposes an accomplished fact. He saw that she walked or rode every day with

her supposed lover; he did not know that as soon as they were out of sight of the house they were joined by Jim, and that Beauchamp then promptly hurried away to smoke a cigar with me, thereby interfering considerably with my daily labours. He seemed to be satisfied that all would now go well; but in truth the apathy which had fallen upon him after his grandson's death was hardly to be stirred by any event, great or small.

One event, for which he, and indeed all London, must have been fully prepared, took place at this time and created no little excitement in the neighbourhood; for we do not study the "society" journals much in our parts, nor does the gossip of the clubs reach us. I say that the financial collapse of the Bracknell establishment can have surprised no one who had lived in or near the fashionable world during the foregoing year or so; yet, if her statement was to be believed, it fell with all the cruelty of an unexpected blow upon the person who, one would have thought, should have been best aware of its imminence. Late one evening, Hilda, bringing with her a stupendous pile of baggage, arrived at Staines Court to cast herself, somewhat dramatically, upon the protection of the head of the house. I happened to be dining there and witnessed her entry upon the scene, which was of a nature to melt the hardest heart. In a voice broken by emotion she told her lamentable tale. She had—so she assured us—no

longer a home; perhaps even she had no longer a husband; for to Bracknell's whereabouts she was unable to obtain any clue. On her return to Wilton Place, after paying a round of visits, she had found the minions of the law in possession, and her personal property seized. "They have taken everything—everything!" she cried. "Even my Bible and Prayer-book are in their hands!"

At this an unfeeling member of her small audience had the bad manners to laugh; but she treated his interruption with the contempt that it deserved, and went on to enlarge upon the pitiable plight in which she found herself. She had nothing left but the clothes she stood up in—those and a few others which she had taken with her to the country. Not a word of warning, not a single direction or suggestion had been vouchsafed to her. After being neglected for years, she was finally abandoned! "And now," she concluded, in a tragic tone, "what am I to do?"

"I should think," answered Lord Staines, rather peevishly, "that you had better go and wash your face and hands and then have some dinner."

The advice was more practical than sympathetic; but such as it was, she acted upon it. She may have had some fear that her father-in-law would recommend her to go straight to the Rectory (which was certainly what I should have done in his place), and no doubt she preferred remaining where she was to seeking that refuge.

Staines Court is a large house; but one of its temporary inmates decided without delay that it was not large enough to contain him and Lady Bracknell at the same time. "I shall be off the first thing to-morrow morning," Beauchamp informed me in confidence, after he had beat a precipitate retreat from the drawing-room, taking me with him. "Called away on urgent business, don't you know. That woman has brass enough for anything, but I'll be hanged if I can trust myself to speak to her."

Beauchamp, who, as I have already mentioned, had latterly favoured me with a good deal of his company, had, in the course of our conversations, taken occasion to express his opinion of Lady Bracknell in the most unequivocal terms. There is no iconoclast so ruthless as an ex-devotee; and indeed it must be very unpleasant to discover that a woman whom you have been disposed to worship has not only made a fool of you, but done her best to rob and murder you into the bargain.

So Beauchamp took wing; and whether Lady Bracknell was annoyed or relieved by his flight I cannot venture to say. She was in some respects so sharp and in others so oddly insensible that, for aught I know, she may still have flattered herself that she might be able to lure him back into her net. Be that as it may, it was hardly to be expected that her ladyship's humour should be of the best at such a time, and from the assiduity of

her attentions to her father-in-law, as well as from the extreme amiability which she displayed towards Lady Mildred, I felt pretty sure that her heart was full of cursing and bitterness. Also, although, upon the whole, she was civil enough to me, she favoured me with a look every now and then, which I understood to mean, "Wait a little longer, my friend. I haven't forgotten your fussy interference with my schemes, and I mean to be even with you yet."

Now, so far as I myself was concerned, I accepted these silent and smiling threats with a good deal of equanimity, for I really did not see how it was in her power to do me any harm; but of course it was open to her to inflict vicarious trouble upon me, while at the same time serving Lady Mildred, whom she hated, an ill turn, and the stone which she ultimately picked up, wherewith to slay this brace of birds, was one which lay, so to speak, at her feet. It would have been very unlike her to overlook it; nor was I at all surprised when Jim sought me out, one day, and informed me with a very long face, that his machinations had been denounced to Lord Staines.

"It was Lady Bracknell's doing," he said. "It seems that she went to the old man and told him that she could not bear to see him hoodwinked, that she felt it her duty to open his eyes—and all that. So she opened his eyes. But I don't think," added Jim pensively, looking down at the

ground and then glancing quickly up at me for a moment—"I don't think that her sense of duty had much to say to the matter."

"I will venture," I remarked, "to go along with you as far as that; I don't think her sense of duty had much to say to it. But perhaps that is of no great consequence. What has been the result of this timely intervention of hers?"

"Oh," answered Jim, with a slight shrug of his shoulders, "the result has been that I have been turned out of the house. I couldn't expect anything else, could I? What annoys me is to think that I have deserved it. Lord Staines really behaved uncommonly well. He sent for me at once and told me that I had been accused by Lady Bracknell of systematically deceiving both him and Beauchamp. He said he thought I ought to know what she asserted, though he himself didn't believe her and was sure that neither Mildred nor I would take advantage of Beauchamp's absence in the way she described. Well, of course she hadn't got it quite right; still, when he put it in that way, I had to tell him the truth. I never felt so small in my life, and I couldn't get him to understand why Beauchamp should have assumed a false character. The end of it was that he sent for Mildred. It was very hard upon her, poor dear; but she came out of it splendidly. I must say that Mildred is——"

"Oh, yes; I know—an angel," I interrupted,

rather rudely. "I don't doubt it; only, if I were in your place I think I should prefer her being a woman. Filial affection is all very fine, but it seems to me that, having made up her mind to marry you, she ought to say so."

"But, my dear fellow, that's exactly what she did," returned Jim. "There was no persuading poor old Staines that Beauchamp wasn't in earnest, and he wanted her to promise that she would give me up. That she refused to do, so then he said he was very sorry, but that, under the circumstances, he must forbid me his house. I couldn't complain of that. I said I was very sorry too, which was true enough. I shouldn't have minded so much if he had flown into a rage; but he was quite quiet all the time, and I'm afraid he was a good deal hurt, poor old chap! Mildred says he is getting fidgety about Bracknell too. They haven't heard a word from him, and the lawyers wrote the other day to say that he had put his affairs into their hands and that he spoke of leaving England. I wonder where he is and what he is going to do!"

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when the door of my study, where we were sitting, was flung open, and in walked Bracknell himself. He marched straight up to Jim, laid a hand on each of his shoulders, and said: "Well, you dear, solemn old Jim, so you're going to have your own way at last, are you? About time too! I saw

Beauchamp in town yesterday, and he told me that it was all right between you and Mildred. I'm heartily glad of it."

It was the voice of the Bracknell of our school days that spoke, and indeed when I looked at him it seemed to me that his eyes, too, had recovered something of their old boyish light. "Give me a cigar, Maynard," said he, seating himself astride upon a chair, "and we'll have a jolly hour together, we three, it's quite on the cards that we may never spend another hour together; for I'm off to the Soudan to fight those black beggars, who seem able to give a pretty good account of themselves. We haven't always been quite as good friends as we once were, but that has been my fault, and as I'm going away now, perhaps you'll forgive and forget, eh, Jim?"

Jim silently stretched out his big brown hand, which the other took; and then I produced my best cigars and rang for brandy and soda. But Bracknell declined that refreshment.

"No drink, thanks," said he, with a laugh. "I've given up drink and cards and everything else that ought to be given up, and I'm going to be a good boy for the future."

He was in wonderfully high spirits. He told us how he had discharged all his debts of honour (which may have had something to do with his inability to discharge the others); how, by working his interest in high quarters, he had managed to

get appointed to some queer corps—whether it was the mounted infantry or the dismounted cavalry or the camel-marines I can't recollect—and how he was looking forward to a noble fight; "which, after all, when you come to think of it, is the very best use that a hulking brute like me can put himself to." But about his wife he said never a word; nor did either Jim or I care to bring forward her name, the former merely mentioning that he had been forbidden to show himself at Staines Court, without specifying the origin of this decree of banishment.

"Oh, that'll be all right," Bracknell said airily; "the governor will come round if you give him time. Now that the pen has gone through Beauchamp's name, there's nothing but you in the race that I can see."

But he did not seem disposed to dwell upon the subject, nor indeed upon any other that was connected with the present or the future. It was about old Eton days that he wanted to talk, and very soon Jim and he were chuckling over the memory of many a bygone escapade, as if they had been schoolboys together once more. At last Bracknell glanced at his watch and pitched away the end of his cigar.

"Ah, well!" he said, "it has been very jolly seeing you fellows again; but my time's up now and I must go and say good-bye to the governor and Mildred. I shall have to get back to

London this evening, so as to make an early start to-morrow. You might walk up with me, Jim. Oh, no, by the way, you can't though. But come down to the station at five o'clock and see the last of me, like a good chap, will you?"

Jim promised that he would be there, and presently Bracknell took my arm and walked me off towards Staines Court. I accompanied him very willingly, because I was rather curious, I confess, to see what would happen if he encountered Hilda; and, as luck would have it, when we were within a few yards of the house that ill-used lady, in a neat walking costume, came tripping down the steps.

She nodded to Bracknell, without any manifestation of surprise. "Oh," said she, "you have turned up at last. Have you come down to stay?"

"No," answered Bracknell shortly, "I have come down to say good-bye to my father. I'm leaving for the Soudan to-morrow."

"Really? How spirited of you! When will you be back do you suppose?"

"I'm sure I don't know; never, perhaps. Don't let me keep you standing in the cold."

Hilda smiled and shrugged her shoulders. "I am not much accustomed to being left out in the cold," she remarked. "Nobody has ever yet succeeded in treating me in that way, and I doubt

whether you will succeed. I shall stay at Staines Court until you return."

"Shall you?" said Bracknell; "I should think you would find that rather dull work. However, you know best what suits you. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," returned Hilda. "Take care of yourself."

She nodded again as she turned away; and so they parted, without so much as shaking hands.

This short dialogue had the effect of sobering my companion, whose face was grave enough when he rang the bell and asked for Lord Staines. I waited for him in the drawing-room while he went to bid farewell to his father and sister, and a long time I had to wait before he reappeared, looking a little flushed and agitated.

"Come on," he said hurriedly, "we haven't much more than time to catch the train." And when we were out in the park he drew a long breath. "Well, I'm glad that's over!" he exclaimed. "Poor dear old boy! I shall never see him again, you know; and, dash it all! I wish I had been a better son to him. Not much use saying that now, eh? But I do wish it, all the same."

I made some stupid conventional speech, to which Bracknell replied, "Oh, he's breaking up fast, anybody can see that, and he knows it himself. Besides, it's rather more likely than not that I shall leave my bones in Egypt: and between

you and me, Maynard, I sha'n't much mind if I do. I've been pretty well sick of life for some time past, and if I could make a fresh start—However, I can't make a fresh start; and as for living with my wife again, I'd sooner go into penal servitude. Upon my word, I think she's the most infernally wicked woman I ever came across!—and I've seen a fairish number of women who are commonly called wicked."

It was neither my business nor my inclination to take up the cudgels on Hilda's behalf, but I said, "You won't make her any better by deserting her, will you?"

"Nor any worse," returned Bracknell. "She'll be glad enough to get rid of me, you may be sure, and she won't have much to complain of; for when I come into the property, if I ever do come into it, she shall have the lion's share of my income. I must pay off Beauchamp too, somehow or other. I say, Maynard, do you believe in Providence? Of course you do though; you're the sort of respectable fellow who would; and your mother brought you up well. I sometimes think Providence may have taken poor little Sunning away for very good reasons. He wouldn't have had your advantages, you see."

Then he suddenly changed the subject and talked about the Egyptian campaign until we reached the station, where we found Jim waiting for us.

The train dashed in immediately afterwards, so that our leave-taking was a brief one. I remember that Bracknell's last words were: "Good-bye, old Jim; don't forget me if I get knocked on the head out there."

CHAPTER XVIII.

I HAD dinner up stairs with my mother that evening. She does not, as a rule, approve of this arrangement, which, she says, gets the servants into slovenly habits; but she will countenance and even encourage it when she is anxious to obtain some information from me, because she knows that I am never so amiable and garrulous as when I am seated before a comfortable fire, with a glass of very fair claret at my elbow, and the digestive process going on satisfactorily. She wanted, of course, to hear all about Bracknell's visit, and was immensely interested in my account of it—more especially in that speech of his which seemed to imply belief in an overruling Providence. Upon this somewhat shaky foundation she soon built up a theory to the effect that Bracknell was a man of deep, albeit unobtrusive, religious convictions, and, warming with her theme (for indeed there is nothing that she delights in more than in trying to make people out better than they are), had just

propounded an amazing and, as I believe, utterly unorthodox application of the dogma of justification by faith, when our aged factotum came in to say that Mr. Leigh was at the door in his dog-cart, and wished to speak to me.

I ran down stairs, feeling sure that some misfortune had happened, and my fears were confirmed when I stepped out into the windy night and Jim, stooping down over the gleaming lamps of the dog-cart, said: "I want you to come up to the station with me, Harry, there's been an accident to the express."

He had heard no particulars, only that a collision had occurred down the line and that a great many lives were believed to have been lost. "I couldn't go to sleep, not knowing whether Bracknell was alive or dead," he said. "Besides, he may be badly hurt, and there's nobody with him."

I agreed that anything was better than suspense, and having sent a message to my mother to the effect that I was going home with Mr. Leigh and might not be back before morning, got into the dog-cart; though I had some doubt as to whether we should be able to proceed to the scene of the catastrophe.

However, when we reached the railway, it seemed that there would be no difficulty on that score. Lord Staines was a great man in our part of the world, and Jim himself enjoys a certain consideration; so that the station-master, on hearing

our errand, at once placed an engine at our disposition. It had been a very bad accident, he told us; but he had heard that there was but four killed outright, and didn't see no reason to fear as his lordship was one of them.

I hardly know why both Jim and I should have formed an opposite opinion. We did not communicate it to each other—indeed we scarcely spoke a word during the half-hour or so that we spent rushing through the darkness in the teeth of the south-easterly gale which had risen since nightfall—but afterwards we compared notes and found that neither of us had had any hope from the first. Perhaps, as far as one of us was concerned, hope would not have been quite the right word to use. A little sooner or a little later death must come to us all; and the future, as poor Bracknell himself had said a few hours before, had had but few bright possibilities to offer him. Yet, when among those four silent, stiffened bodies, we recognised the one of which we were in search, I own that my philosophy broke down, and that I was just as sorry as if there had been no mitigating circumstances connected with this swift blotting out of a life which was still young and vigorous. One thinks of the mitigating circumstances afterwards: at the time, a sudden death always seems something strange and horrible, like a murder; although probably most of us, if we could choose, would rather be killed at a blow than die by inches.

Jim took the loss of his friend terribly to heart. He had always loved the man, always admired him and wanted to believe in him, even when faith must have been a little difficult, and it was long before he recovered from the shock of that fatal night. To the present day he cannot bear any allusion to it; nor, I must confess, is it a subject upon which I myself care to dwell. Our first duty, of course, was to break the news at Staines Court; and how we accomplished this I can scarcely remember. The one thing that stands out clearly in my recollection is Hilda's look of horror when she was told in what manner her husband had met his death.

"I can't see him!" she cried. "Are they bringing him here? I won't look at anything shocking!"

It seemed to me amazing that at such a moment the woman's first thought should have been to spare herself; but perhaps, after all, it would have been more amazing if her first thought had been anything else.

Lord Staines was in bed when we reached the house. It was thought best that I should at once tell him what could not long be concealed, and he listened to me with very little apparent emotion. He asked me whether I thought Bracknell's death had been a painful one; and when I replied—as, happily, I was able to do—that it must have been instantaneous, he muttered, "Well, well!" and lay

back on his pillows, looking straight before him with sunken, weary eyes.

"So there is an end and a finish of us," he said presently; "maybe it's best so. It seems odd that Bracknell and Sunning should both go before me; but I don't suppose I shall have much longer to wait now. When my poor boy and I parted this afternoon, we knew that it was for the last time, and I'm glad he came to see me—I'm very glad he came to see me. He was in great glee at the prospect of a fight—he has always been like that from a boy. We Henleys may have our faults, but I don't think we have ever been accused of wanting pluck. Bracknell will make himself heard of out there, you'll see. I was a little vexed with him at first for going off and leaving me, but he gave me reasons, and I believe he was right. I wish he didn't hate writing letters so much! The newspapers will tell us all about him though."

In this way the old man wandered on, until Lady Mildred came softly into the room and made me a sign to leave him. I doubt whether he ever fully realised what Bracknell's fate had been. During the next few days he talked a great deal about his son, sometimes speaking of him as still alive, sometimes as having been killed in Egypt; but he did not seem able to fix his mind upon any subject for more than a few minutes at a time and often failed to recognise those about him. One

duty, fortunately, recurred to his memory; and his performance of it was, I believe, an immense comfort to two simple-minded and conscientious people.

"My poor boy," he said, when he had caused Jim Leigh to be summoned and had made him take Lady Mildred's hand, "told me that I might consent to your marriage without loss of honour. I had thought differently, but Bracknell assured me that some one — the other man——"

"Mr. Beauchamp?" suggested Lady Mildred gently, when her father came to a long pause.

"Beauchamp, yes—Beauchamp, it seems, withdraws. There is money owing to Beauchamp, and I can't attend to business now; but you will see that he is repaid. Bracknell explained it all to me, but I have forgotten. He promised that the money should be paid though."

"It shall be paid, papa," said Lady Mildred.

"Thank you, my dear. You have been a good daughter and you will be a good wife. I wish you all happiness."

These were the last intelligible words that he said. He lingered on for some days after this, but soon sank into a state of semi-consciousness, in which at last he passed quietly away. My mother says that he did his duty according to his lights and will be judged by that standard; and perhaps it may be allowed that in this instance she

does not push charity beyond all reasonable limits.

His titles died with him, except that of the barony of Bracknell, which is of ancient creation and which has passed to his daughter. By her also have been inherited his estates, which, although still heavily encumbered, will doubtless recover themselves in time under their present judicious management.

Jim's marriage was a very quiet affair, the bride being in deep mourning at the time for her father and brother; but Lady Petworth, who came down to take charge of the orphan after Lord Staines's death, considered it undesirable that the ceremony should be too long postponed; so good Mr. Turner tied the knot, and the young couple have been living at Elmhurst ever since in a seclusion which I dare say is agreeable to both of them, but of which the county does not altogether approve. Jim tells me that the debt of honour bequeathed to his wife has already been paid off and that he hopes in the course of a few years to be able to move to Staines Court, which is at present shut up. In the meantime he is very well satisfied with his own less pretentious abode; and indeed, if a man were to be condemned to live in the country from year's end to year's end, I don't know that he could find any pleasanter place to live in than Elmhurst, while I am persuaded that he would search in vain for a fellow-

exile more amiable and charming than Lady Bracknell.

The other Lady Bracknell—the viscountess of that name—has quite recently decided to put an end to all confusion of identity between her sister-in-law and herself by changing her condition. During the first few months of her widowhood she resided with her father—a touching spectacle to the neighbourhood, as she drove about, with lowered eyelids, in her weeds. Whether after a time she became bored with the respectful sympathy of the neighbourhood or whether she found herself better off than she had anticipated I do not know; but she moved somewhat suddenly to London, set up house there, discarded crape in favour of pale grey and began to dispense a hospitality of which many people were found ready to avail themselves. Rumour has it that, on recovering her freedom, she made a desperate bid for the Beauchamp property and that the fortunate owner thereof met her advances by requesting her in so many words to omit him from the list of her acquaintances; but I do not believe this story. Hilda has experience enough to be aware that flirting with a married woman and espousing her after she has become a widow are two very different things, and it is not likely that so clear-sighted an observer would have wasted time and energy upon a forlorn hope. As a matter of fact, she has done far better for herself than she would

have done by marrying Beauchamp; for she is about to be led to the altar by the eldest son of a duke, and I hear that the bridegroom's relatives have received her with marked cordiality. Her career, so far as it has gone, may serve as a warning to impulsive young men and as an encouragement to the daughters of the clergy.

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THE END.

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